



Università  
Ca' Foscari  
Venezia

# European Joint Master's Degree in English and American Studies

## Final Thesis

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Ca' Foscari  
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# Not That Kind of Woman: Censorship and the Representation of Female Sexuality in Pre-Code Hollywood.

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### **Academic Year**

**2014 / 2015**

## ABSTRACT

The Pre-Code era is a misnomer that refers to a four-year period in which the Hollywood motion picture industry formally decided to abide by a self-regulatory code concerning film content, the Production Code, from 1930 to 1934, before being heavily enforced. Fearing federal censorship and boycotts from religious and reform groups, the MPPDA president, Will H. Hays, along with a group of Catholic laymen and priests, led to the creation of this form of self-censorship and managed to impose it upon the industry itself. The Code was written by a Jesuit priest and college drama professor, Daniel A. Lord, who believed in the moral importance of entertainment, and that the industry had special moral obligations and responsibilities in producing morally good films.

The first part of this thesis intends to investigate – with the aim of original documents and letters from the MPPDA Digital Archive – how, during those four years, the MPPDA struggled to enforce the Production Code, while the second – taking into account four Pre-Code films, *Red-Headed Woman* (1932), *I'm No Angel* (1933), *Female* (1933) and *Design for Living* (1933) – aims to analyze how, in spite of the SRC's attempts to censor it, female sexuality was portrayed on screen.

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## INTRODUCTION

[She] has killed our grandmothers. She has killed what they stood for. She has murdered the old-time Good Woman. She has cremated the myth that men will never marry 'that kind of woman'. She has abolished 'that kind of woman'. There remain – free souls<sup>1</sup>.

Thus *Motion Picture Magazine* described Norma Shearer in 1932. Typecast in the role of ingénue in silent movies, Shearer found enormous success during the pre-Code era, interpreting daring roles in films such as *The Divorcée* (1930), *Strangers May Kiss* (1931), *A Free Soul* (1931), and *Riptide* (1934) – her last one before the creation of the Production Code Administration. The heroines she portrayed in these pre-Code films were 'overt about pursuing their sexual desires', and 'confronted the sexual double standards of the era' (Lugowski, 132).

The Pre-Code era refers to a period of four years, from March 1930 to mid-1934, during which the Hollywood industry, for fear of state and federal censorship, imposed on itself a moral code that regulated the content of movies. During those four years, however, 'the Code commandments were [often] violated [. . .] in a series of wildly eccentric films. More unbridled, salacious, subversive [. . .] than what came afterwards' (Doherty, 2). In mid-1934, the industry was pressured by the Catholic church and its Legion of Decency – formed in protest at those very films – into heavily enforcing the Production Code. The enforced moral code would

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in LaSalle, 6.

be used to censor films until 1968, when Hollywood would finally adopt the alphabet ratings system.

Despite focusing on a variety of subjects, like the representation of crime and religion, 'the emphasis of the code, like that of the Hays Office before it and the rating system of the Motion Picture Association after it, was on sex, an activity both sinful and, from the moral referees' point of view, [inexplicably] contagious' (Haskell, 118). And particularly problematic was the representation of female sexuality in pre-Code films. In a letter to Harry Cohn, president of Columbia Pictures Corporation, Jason Joy, Hollywood's chief censor at the time, wrote, 'The important thing is to leave the audience with the definite conclusion that immorality is not justifiable, that society is not wrong in demanding certain standards of its women, and that the guilty woman, through realization of her error, does not tempt other women in the audience to follow her course' (Joy to Cohn, Jan. 16, 1932)<sup>2</sup>. Female sexuality was conceived as a serious threat, because, in spite of the Production Code, it was not only willfully and overtly expressed by women on the screen, but also – and most importantly – often celebrated, and portrayed in sympathetic ways. As Haskell argues in her seminal *From Reverence to Rape*,

Until the Production Code went into full force [in mid-1934], [. . .] women were conceived of as having sexual desire without being freaks, villains, or even necessarily Europeans – an attitude surprising to those of us nurtured on the movies of any other period. Women were entitled to initiate sexual encounters, to pursue men, even to embody certain 'male' characteristics without being stigmatized as 'unfeminine' or 'predatory'. Nor was their

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Jacobs, 3.

sexuality thought as cunning or destructive, in the manner of certain forties' heroines; rather, it was unabashedly front and center [. . .] (91).

In the first part of this thesis I will investigate, using original documents from the *MPPDA Digital Archive*, movie censorship prior to the adoption of the Production Code; I will analyze the original text of the Production Code, and how, during the subsequent four years from its adoption, Will H. Hays and Hollywood chief censors – Jason Joy, James Wingate, and finally Joseph Breen – struggled to enforce it; finally, I will examine the events that brought about the strict enforcement of the Code and the creation of the Production Code Administration in mid-1934.

In the second part, I will analyze four pre-Code movies, *Red-Headed Woman* (1932), *I'm No Angel* (1933), *Female* (1933), and *Design for Living* (1933): I will examine how the Studio Relations Committee attempted to censor the heroines' sexuality, and how, instead, it was depicted in the final version of these movies.

## **PART ONE**

### **1. PRE-CODE HOLLYWOOD AND THE MOVIES: MORAL MENACE, OBSCENITY, VULGARITY, IMMORALITY, EXPOSURE, SEX**

The very first form of movie censorship was created in 1907, when the police, by means of an ordinance ruled by the city of Chicago, acquired legal power to ban, or censor films if they deemed them immoral or obscene. At the end of 1908, the debate of movie censorship was then brought to national attention by then New York City's Mayor, George B. McClellan. McClellan's 'arbitrary, tyrannical and unreasonable' (NYT Jan. 9, 1909, in Black, 13) ordinance to have all movie theaters in the city close on Christmas Day gave rise to public outcry. After this sensational event, the National Board of Censorship, changed into the National Board of Review (NBR) in 1915, was created by the People's Institute, 'one of the few reform organizations that did not see movies as evil' (Black, 13), in 1909. The aim of this board, mainly made up by Protestant, upper middle-class volunteers, was to censor potentially offending material from films before they were distributed all over the country: the major motion picture producers willingly supported this initiative, and ultimately paid the board a 'censorship fee' in order to cover the costs of this reviewing process. Despite this precautionary form of self-regulation, reform organizations all over the country continued to criticize the Motion Picture industry, and deemed the moral standards of the NBR far too permissive and

liberal. As a result, state censorship boards were created in other states of the country, which conformed to their own local community standards of morality. In 1915, the anti-movie campaign sustained by reform organizations was reinforced by the staggering verdict of the U.S. Supreme Court on an appeal that claimed the unconstitutionality of Ohio state censorship boards and maintained that freedom of speech should be guaranteed to movies, putting them on the same level as every other instrument of opinion: as reported by Black, the Supreme Court judges ruled, 'We feel the argument is wrong or strained which extends the guaranties of free opinion and speech' to theater, the circus, or movies, because 'they may be used for evil'; they also considered movies 'a business pure and simple', 'not regarded by the Ohio constitution, we think, as part of the press . . . or as organs of public opinions' (16). What was most surprising about this ruling was that the Supreme Court jurists used the word 'evil' in correlation to the movies.

By 1921, the role of the National Board of Review subsided. During that year, the anti-movie campaign would significantly benefit from a series of bills against motion pictures which were introduced in state legislatures all over the country, and from a series of sex scandals involving the private lives of some movie stars – the most sensational was probably the one which saw the death of an actress after one of the several wild Hollywood parties hosted by the hugely popular comedian, Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle. Regardless of more than one verdict of not guilty, public opinion believed the gossip about Arbuckle's sexual perversions, and mercilessly judged him guilty, putting him indefinitely out of business. The motion picture industry battened down the hatches creating a trade association, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) at the beginning of 1922,

and put William Harrison (Will) Hays in the role of president, a role that saw him as the spokesman and advocate for the whole industry. Hays seemed a most appropriate choice: as Black points out, 'his roots were solidly Midwestern, his politics conservatively Republican, and his religion mainstream Protestant', and 'symbolized the figurative Puritan in Babylon' (31). His appointment was also 'a sign of Hollywood's apprehension over the condemnation of movies by spokesmen for Protestant, small-town America' (Couvares, 132). As he worked from his New York office, Hays had little to no control over the content of movies produced in the Los Angeles studios. He had been hired as a public relations agent and spokesperson, in other words, the studio moguls wanted him to quiet the anti-movie campaign endorsed by religious and reform groups, and to advocate against federal censorship of the movies. He successfully mediated with these religious groups, and engaged – and paid – them in the hard task of improvement, or as he called it, 'betterment' of the movies from a moral point of view.

Nonetheless, in 1927, 'relations between Hays and the Protestant churches took a turn for the worse' (Couvares, 136). At the same time, legislators were filing more and more bills in Congress, pleading for a stricter regulation of the motion picture industry, and for federal censorship. Hays's response was to create the Studio Relations Committee (SRC) headquartered in Hollywood, close enough to the production studios, and assigned the role of director to Jason Joy, a former executive secretary of the American Red Cross. Reviewing the most common demands of state and local censorship boards, Joy was to draw up clear guidelines for the Hollywood producers in order to avoid potentially offending

material, and, as a result, costly censorship, and to ultimately make sure that they would stick to them. These guidelines were gathered in eleven 'Don'ts' and twenty-six 'Be-Carefuls', which the Hollywood studios reluctantly approved: the 'Don'ts', which 'shall not appear in pictures produced by the members of this Association (MPPDA), irrespective of the manners in which they are treated', concerned profanity, nudity (of both adults and children), drug trafficking, sexual perversion, white slavery, miscegenation, sex hygiene and venereal diseases, childbirth, ridicule of the clergy, and willful offense to any nation, race or creed; the 'Be-Carefuls', which were to be treated with 'special care', 'to the end that vulgarity and suggestiveness may be eliminated and that good taste may be emphasized', concerned criminal activity, law enforcement and law enforcement officers, the use of the Flag, sedition, rape, seduction, the institution of marriage, surgical operations, and kissing<sup>3</sup>.

When the talkies began to replace silent films towards the end of the 1920s, they brought a new surge of controversy over the content of movies. On the other hand, in the industry's fight against federal censorship, Hays found a new ally in the Catholic Church. As Couvares points out, 'by the end of the 1920s, [. . .] the apparently nonpolitical moralism of American Catholicism seemed to fit the industry's needs' (143). It seemed a perfect match, as the Catholic Church, unlike Protestant churches, seemed to oppose vigorously and unanimously federal and legislated censorship. If the movies were not considered a priority by Catholic America throughout the 1920s, that drastically changed when a small group of Catholic laymen and priests became increasingly concerned with what they

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<sup>3</sup> See Resolution incorporating the Don'ts and Be-Carefuls , June 29, 1927, Record #365, *MPPDA Digital Archive*. Flinders Institute for Research in the Humanities. Web. Hereafter referred to as type of document, date, and record number.

perceived as the extremely alarming issue of movie morality. Among them, there were three key figures: Martin Quigley, a stout lay Catholic and publisher of a series of movie industry trade papers, which, in 1928, would merge into the *Exhibitors' Herald-World*, later called *Motion Picture Herald*; he was one of the first Catholics to advocate a stricter self-regulation of Hollywood; Father Daniel Lord, S.J., who taught drama at St. Louis University and served as assistant editor of the *Queen's Work*, the widely read magazine of the Sodality of the Blessed Virgin; and Joseph I. Breen, an active Irish Catholic and an extreme anti-Semite<sup>4</sup>, who worked in the immigration department of the National Catholic Welfare Conference, and was then responsible for the public relations of the 1926 Eucharistic Conference in Chicago, before becoming public relations director for the Peabody Coal Company; before being appointed Director of the PCA, he was head of West Coast public relations<sup>5</sup>.

In 1929, Hays, in a desperate attempt to quiet the growing demands for federal censorship, decided to increase the strictness of the industry's self-regulation. With the blessing of the Catholic Church, he asked Lord to draft a movie code of self-censorship: after reviewing numerous state and local censorship codes, SRC's eleven 'Don'ts' and twenty-six 'Be-Carefuls', and the objections of Protestant reformers, Lord wrote a moral code for the movies, 'A Code to Maintain Social and Community Values, in the production of silent, synchronized and talking motion pictures'. With the support of the corporate offices in New York City, on February 10, 1930, Lord, backed by Hays, Quigley, and Jason Joy, passionately argued for, and thoroughly explained the Code to producers Jesse Lasky

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<sup>4</sup> See Black (70–71).

<sup>5</sup> See *MPPDA Digital Archive*. Flinders Institute for Research in the Humanities. Web.

(Paramount), Irving Thalberg and Paul Bern (MGM), Jack Warner (Warner Bros.), and studio representatives B. P. Schulberg of Paramount and Sol Wertzell of Fox<sup>6</sup>. At the end of March, 1930, the new Code was formally approved by all major studio executives in a meeting in New York, with the concession that a jury of producers would have the final say on whether or not potentially offending material should be cut from movies.

The Production Code comprised three sections: a preamble, general principles, and particular applications. In the preamble Lord emphasized the role of motion pictures as pure entertainment. He was convinced that, since entertainment could be either 'helpful' or 'harmful', that is, it could 'improve the race', raising 'the whole standard of a nation', or, on the contrary, 'degrade human beings', lowering 'the whole living conditions and moral ideals of a race', motion pictures had a 'moral importance'. Motion pictures were also to be regarded as art, and could, according to the artist's intentions, be 'morally good' or 'morally wrong'<sup>7</sup>,

The motion pictures, which are the most popular of modern arts for the masses, have their moral quality from the intention of the minds which produce them and from their effects on the moral lives and reactions of their audiences. This gives them the most important morality.

1. They **reproduce** the morality of the men who use the pictures as a medium for the expression of their ideas and ideals.

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<sup>6</sup> See Transcription MPPDA 671.pdf, *MPPDA Digital Archive*. Flinders Institute for Research in the Humanities. Web.

<sup>7</sup> Reasons Supporting A Code to Govern the Making of Motion and Talking Pictures, March 31, 1930, Record #672.

2. They **affect** the moral standards of those who through the screen take in these ideas and ideals<sup>8</sup>.

But most importantly, Lord wrote the Code around the idea that motion pictures had special 'moral obligations' and 'moral responsibilities': because of 'the mobility [. . .], accessibility, emotional appeal, vividness, straight-forward presentation of fact' of the movies, he argued, they appealed at once to every class; they had to be regarded and treated differently than books, newspapers, or plays; they reached every part of the country, even small, rural communities, 'remote from sophistication and from the hardening process which often takes place in the ethical and moral standards of groups in larger cities'<sup>9</sup>.

The three general principles, on which Lord based the Code, were:

1. No picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrong-doing, evil or sin.
2. Correct standards of life shall be presented on the screen, subject only to necessary dramatic contrasts.
3. Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation<sup>10</sup>.

How evil was presented in motion pictures was particularly crucial: evil should never be 'presented alluringly' and there should be no doubt that 'evil is wrong and good is right'. Even though in the end it was condemned or punished, evil,

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Production Code, March 31, 1930, Record #1255.

throughout a film, should never appear 'so attractive that the audience's emotions are drawn to desire or approve so strongly that later the condemnation is forgotten and only the apparent joy of the sin remembered'<sup>11</sup>.

Lord concluded the Code with a detailed description of how certain sensitive subjects should be treated in motion pictures. The twelve particular applications regarded: crimes against the law, sex, vulgarity, obscenity, profanity, costume, dances, religion, locations, national feelings, titles, and repellent subjects<sup>12</sup>. For instance, regarding sex, Lord prescribed, 'The sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld. Pictures shall not infer that low forms of sex relationship are the accepted or common thing'<sup>13</sup>, explaining then in detail how to treat – or not treat at all – specific instances like adultery, scenes of passion, seduction or rape, sex perversion etc.

As Black argues, Lord and the other Catholics that made the creation of the Code possible, among whom Breen,

They all wanted entertainment films to emphasize that the church, the government, and the family were the cornerstones of an orderly society; that success and happiness resulted from respecting and working within this system. Entertainment films, they felt, should reinforce religious teachings that deviant behavior, whether criminal or sexual, cost violators the love and comforts of home, the intimacy of family, the solace of religion, and the protection of law. Films should be twentieth-century morality plays that illustrated proper behavior to the masses (39).

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<sup>11</sup> Reasons Supporting A Code to Govern the Making of Motion and Talking Pictures, March 31, 1930, Record #672.

<sup>12</sup> Printed Copy of the 1930 Production Code, January 1, 1931, Record #2254.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

From the very beginning, Joy, the enforcer of the Code for Hays, was contrasted by the producers, who treated the Code as a general guideline for movie morality, open to interpretation. As a result, the following four years would see a constant fight between Hays and the Hollywood studios over whether the Code was up for liberal interpretation or not.

In 1931, contrary to Hays' expectations, the anti-movie campaign had become more clamorous than ever, and his office was being flooded with letters of protest. As a result, Lord, who all the while had been consulted about script evaluations from St. Louis, was asked to give a thorough evaluation on the effectiveness of the Code during its first year from its adoption. On April 23, in a report called 'The Code, One Year Later', he wrote,

This year I find, after studying the stories and scripts of dozen of forthcoming pictures, that your authors have injected into the basic stories an underlying philosophy of life. The stories are now concerned with problems. They discuss morals, divorce, free love, unborn children, relationships outside marriage, single and double standards, the relationship of sex to religion, marriage and its effect on the freedom of women – these and a dozen other kindred subjects have been injected into the talking picture.

He, then, proceeded to caution against the potential danger of said 'problems':

Now no matter how delicate or clean the treatment, these subjects are fundamentally dangerous. A succession of them presented to the public

gives an entirely false emphasis on your basic material which will do your pictures no good<sup>14</sup>.

Lord reported worriedly that, the year before, what Joy and his associates deemed particularly concerning were single scenes: once they were cut out, 'the film at once was placed in the realm of the wholesome and moral'. A year later, what they were to be worried about, he cautioned, was an 'underlying philosophy of life' behind movies.

He believed that the issue with movies lay in their source material, that is, Broadway plays, which 'are not written for America, but for a very small and sophisticated audience', and sophisticated best sellers, 'problem novels whose problems are stated but not answered'. Furthermore, the discussion of philosophical and moral themes in movies, he deemed, were 'especially dangerous' for a variety of reasons: the actors that played the hero or the heroine were always attractive, thus in the minds of their admirers they could not possibly be in any way wrong; the actual answer of the problem presented in a movie was usually unsatisfactory; 'youthful and untrained audiences' were not able to distinguish right from wrong; the discussion of philosophy or morals in movies destroyed the dramatic value, in other words, they caused a loss of action.

A week later, in a memorandum to Hays, Joy explained the operation of the Production Code machinery during its first year: '[. . .] during the past year we had to suggest approximately 975 major changes in the 286 scripts of feature pictures submitted to us. By major changes we mean those requiring the entire change of an idea or of the meaning of certain incidents or the characterization of certain

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<sup>14</sup> The Code, One Year Later, April 23, 1931, Record #766.

characters [. . .]'. He also pointed out the difficulties he faced in carrying out the Code:

[. . .] we have found that by far the most effective results are obtained by these early consultations (before the script is written) and that whenever the producer lets us into his confidence at this early stage, we have few, if any, subsequent difficulties with the picture.

After the script is prepared, the adaptor has created something which is decidedly difficult to destroy or tamper with<sup>15</sup>.

By the summer of 1932, Joy would be under 'constant stress and pressure' 'to a point [. . .] it has been almost crushing'. From the very beginning, he was put in an extremely difficult position: he had the unfortunate – and impossible – task of having to please both the producers and the censorship boards at the same time, meaning, approving movies that people wanted to see – in other words profitable movies – all the while enforcing the Production Code. Reality would prove this quite unattainable. In a memorandum dated August 20, 1932, Hays noted, 'There have been some pictures which in theme, in my opinion, did not comply with the spirit of the Code; there have been sequences in several pictures that in my opinion grossly violate the spirit and actually violate the letter of the Code'. Furthermore, what he had discovered after a six week period during which 'I (Hays) have studied as carefully as possible the local reasons for the objectionable trend in certain pictures, the factor of causation and the individuals concerned' was, 'These mistakes originate in the script, they are pursued in the production, they are endorsed by the studio management and after countless

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<sup>15</sup> Memo Joy to Hays, April 29, 1931, Record #778.

eliminations effected by you (Joy), they still in a modified degree persist'. Even though the Production Code was approved unanimously by all the studio heads, Joy, or Hays, in reality, did not have the authority to ban specific movies or have specific scenes cut from a movie: all they could do was warn, threaten, and negotiate with the studio producers. Replying to Hays's memorandum, which also emphasized the need to enforce the Code and to 'bring motion pictures to a still higher level of wholesome entertainment for all the people'<sup>16</sup>, Schenck, President of United Artists Corporation, then chairman of the board of directors of Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation, made it quite clear that,

[. . .] Colonel Joy and his associates have done all that they possibly could do towards the enforcement of the Production Code. The Production Code, in my opinion, cannot be honestly enforced [. . .].

As a friend, I just want to caution you not to drive too far, as far as the Code is concerned, and consider the Code a restraint but not a law. Your system of self-regulation is right but your reference to "no lapse in Code enforcement shall be allowed" is all wrong because you address these lines to our internal censors and if they interpret you literally they will make too much trouble for the producers and will destroy the value of the Code as everybody will drop away from it and disregard it, regardless of any commitment they have made, as the first and most important commitment they have is to produce pictures that the public will come in to see<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Memo Hays to McKinnon, Shurlock, Fisher, Wilson, Trotti, Joy, August 20, 1932, Record #844.

<sup>17</sup> Letter Schenck to Hays, August 29, 1932, Record #849.

In addition to all this, Joy, just before accepting a job at Fox studios as a story consultant and happily quitting his position as president of the SRC, expressed to Hays his concerns over the increasingly popular sex pictures: in September, 1932, he informed Hays that, 'Of 111 pictures which are now in production, [. . .] 24 – or approximately 20% – deal in one way or another with illicit sex relationships. [. . .] the illicit sex picture at this moment seemingly predominates over any other specified type'. He was concerned that, '[. . .] if the present rate holds, approximately 100 pictures dealing with illicit sex relationships will reach the screens during the coming year', asking urgently for instructions, 'Are there too many illicit sex pictures now on or immediately planned for the screen? And if so, what ought to be done?'<sup>18</sup>.

In mid October, 1932, Hays was relieved to announce that James Wingate, chief censor for the State Education Department in New York, had agreed to replace Joy as president of the SRC<sup>19</sup>. Wingate, an experienced state censor, took over Joy's job during an extremely difficult time for the studios: they were all experiencing financial constraints, in particular Paramount and RKO, both of which were on the verge of bankruptcy. In their desperate attempt to bring people to the movies, they found themselves competing with one another in the making of racier and racier films. And unfortunately enough for Wingate, one of his very first assignments was to deal with Paramount's screen adaptation of *Diamond Lil* – the hugely successful and scandalous play by Mae West. Paramount had previously tried to adapt it for the screen and add West to their array of stars, but was successfully talked out of

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<sup>18</sup> Memo Joy to Hays, September 1, 1932, Record #855.

<sup>19</sup> See Chronology of Events and MMPPA and AMPP Decisions over Implementations of Production Code from 1930, June 22, 1934, Record #1048.

it by Joy. Now, with Joy's departure from the SRC, Paramount executives, desperate to save their company, started shooting a version of West's play on November 25, 1932, regardless of Hays's threats to stop the production unless and until approval had been given by the MPPDA Board of Directors in New York. Three days later, the story was cleared by the board, providing that the movie could not be in any way associated with the play in publicity and advertisements, and that it complied with the Code. In addition to changing the title into *She Done Him Wrong*, Wingate, in an effort to tone it down from the play, changed and added some lines<sup>20</sup>. After it was released at the end of January, 1933, the NYT wrote, '[West] gave a remarkably suspicious impersonation of Diamond Lil. In fact, *She Done Him Wrong*, with a few discreet cuts and alterations, is the same [as] *Diamond Lil* [. . .]'<sup>21</sup>.

It was clear from the very beginning that Wingate was not the right man for the job. As reported by Walsh in *Sin and Censorship*, Lord condemned *She Done Him Wrong* as precisely the kind of picture which the Code had been designed to prevent. If the movies in 1933 were worse than before the adoption of the Code, the person to blame was Wingate, Lord thought. He was especially critical of Wingate's attempts to enforce the Code, that is, cutting and adding some lines here and there in order to elevate the moral stance of a film, all the while wholly ignoring its message, or 'Trying to put everything right with a bit of moralizing in the last hundred feet of film [. . .] (so as to) wipe out the previous seventy-five minutes of indecency' (Walsh, 77). It was also during this period, the first half of 1933, that the American Catholic church began to publicly voice its dissent against

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<sup>20</sup> See *She Done Him Wrong*, *American Film Institute*. Web.

<sup>21</sup> Movie Review of *She Done Him Wrong* (1933), February 10, 1933, *New York Times*. Web.

Hollywood: Catholic priests started denouncing the movies in articles, editorials, and sermons.

Pro-censorship, and reform groups, at the beginning of 1933, had become 'more keenly critical and more expressive' than ever before. Hays, during this 'moment of hysterical criticism', urged all the studio heads to re-affirm 'their determination to refrain from making pictures which in whole or in part would violate'<sup>22</sup> the Production Code. If Code violations persisted, he threatened to do everything in his power – even appealing to the public – to restore 'the moral and artistic standards of motion picture production'<sup>23</sup>,

Some tendencies have appeared in pictures that will have to be eliminated. If Code violations are not thus eliminated by the studios themselves, or by the operation of the Resolution for Uniform Interpretation of the Code, they shall be deleted here from the finished pictures and the responsibilities fixed. If there is any failure by this process to accomplish the necessary results, I propose to appeal for support, first, to you if it is a picture produced by your company; next, to the president of the company whose picture is involved; next, to the Board of Directors, the bankers and the stockholders of the company involved; and failing in this, I propose to appeal to the public whose servants, after all, the industry is and on whose support the industry must depend for its sustenance<sup>24</sup>.

Sidney R. Kent, president of Fox Film Corporation, fully agreed with Hays. Kent shared Hays's own concerns over the worsening state of movies and, what they

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<sup>22</sup> Letter Wingate to Hays, March 10, 1933, Record #888.

<sup>23</sup> Reaffirmation of Advertising Code and Production Code and Formula, March 7, 1933, Record #891.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

believed were the harmful effects that these movies were having upon the industry,

I went last night to see the Mae West picture, SHE DONE HIM WRONG. In my opinion it is the worst picture I have seen. It was the real story of Diamond Lil and they got away with it. They promised that that story would not be made. I believe it is worse than Red Headed Woman from the standpoint of the industry – it is far more suggestive in word and what is not said is suggested in action. I cannot understand how your (Hays's) people on the Coast could let his get by<sup>25</sup>.

Like Hays, he believed that 'The time has arrived to stop talking and do something', and promptly informed him that he '[. . .] would go as far as anybody in the industry in any action you (Hays) finally take'<sup>26</sup>. According to Harry Cohn, president of Columbia Pictures Corporation, the reason why the Code had been violated time after time was, in fact, that no studio really thought that serious action would be taken<sup>27</sup>. At the end of March, 1933, after the resolution of re-affirmation of adherence to the Production Code had been formally adopted<sup>28</sup>, Hays sent a letter to all the studio executives, admonishing that now '[. . .] there will be action. Such action may of necessity be drastic and may entail loss to the company involved. That loss we would like to avoid. The one sure way to avoid it is not to

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<sup>25</sup> Letter Kent to Hays, March 9, 1933, Record #893.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> See Letter Robert H. Cochrane (Universal) to Hays, March 29, 1933, Record #908.

<sup>28</sup> See Chronology of Events and MMPPA and AMPP Decisions over Implementations of Production Code from 1930, June 22, 1934, Record #1048 .

have the mistake, either in the purchase of the material or in the way it is handled'<sup>29</sup>.

Still in the spring of 1933, another blow to the industry came from the publication of nine of the twelve studies, financed by the Payne Study and Experiment Fund, and commissioned by Reverend William H. Short, on the impact of motion pictures on children and teenagers. Eleven of these studies – for unknown reasons, one was never published – were later summarized in a sensationalist way by Henry James Forman in his hugely popular *Our Movie-Made Children*. As reported by Sklar in *Movie-Made America*, Short, who was president of the National Committee for Study of Social Values in Motion Pictures, ‘a euphemistically named pro-censorship group’ (134), had previously tried to prove the deleterious influence of movies on American society, publishing in 1928 a four-hundred-page book made entirely of citations from sermons, transcribed testimonies, editorials, books and articles. Now, thanks to a grant from a private foundation, he had finally the chance to ‘scientifically’ prove it to the world with the help of scholars and researchers from various universities. What some of the Payne studies attempted to assess was, for instance, how young people emotionally responded to movies, using the psycho-galvanometer; whether movies changed their attitudes towards certain social groups; whether they affected children’s sleep; how much information children retained from movies they watched; and how the conduct and values of young movie fans varied from those of non moviegoers, or rather occasional moviegoers. Some of the other studies were more statistical – what was the actual number of children going to the movies – still others were more

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<sup>29</sup> Letter Hays to MMPDA (members), March 28, 1933, Record # 907.

sensationalistic – how movies affected social conduct; the relation between movies and delinquency. Despite ‘their almost total lack of perspective’ (136) – no comparisons between the impact of movies and that of other stimuli in the environment were made; no investigation was made into whether other sources, before the invention of movies, had provided similar kinds of experiences – and even though several of the researchers admitted that generalizations were difficult to draw because of the narrow focus of the research design, and the extremely heterogeneous reactions of their subjects even to the same movie, the Payne studies were used as ‘scientific proof’ by reformers in the increasingly heated debate over movie censorship.

Roughly at the same time as the Payne studies were published, Lord’s involvement in the Hollywood industry, and, thus, his friendly relations with Hays came to a halt: at the end of May, he informed Hays that he ‘felt completely let down on the Code’ and that Hollywood could go ‘merrily to hell’. He complained that motion pictures ‘have grown worse and worse’, because, in Hollywood, not ‘one man in twenty’ had ‘the slightest consideration for morality and decency’, and even warned him that ‘powerful groups’ were planning ‘aggressive action’ (Lord to Hays, May 26, 1933, in Black, 151) against Hollywood.

Breen, in the meanwhile, had been steadily gaining power within the SRC: he was appointed Wingate’s assistant in March, 1933, displaying – unlike Wingate – a gift for dealing with Code matters and producers, while in August ‘he was made responsible for the whole work of the department (SRC)<sup>30</sup>, and officially replaced Wingate at the helm of the Studio Relations Committee, in December. From the

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<sup>30</sup> Chronology of Events and MMPPA and AMPP Decisions over Implementations of Production Code from 1930, June 22, 1934, Record #1048 .

very beginning, when he first started working for Hays in 1931, Breen had never tried to hide his hatred towards the industry. As Walsh points out,

Much of Breen's criticism stemmed from a streak of Puritanism saturated with a strong strain of anti-Semitism. Hollywood, in his eyes, was a den of iniquity filled with "perverts," including a "lady star who admitted to being lesbian," studio heads who jumped into the bed with their neighbor's wife, and birthday parties where the place cards for men were "condrums" [Breen to Hays, Aug. 29, 1931] (*sic*) and Kotex with a dash of ketchup for the women. Little wonder that they cared nothing about the Code "except to sneer and laugh at it as a first rate gag to fool the 'blue noses' and the 'church people'" [Breen to Rev. Parsons, Oct. 10, 1932] The abandonment of the Code, the filthy pictures, and the immoral lifestyles, he claimed, could all be laid at the door of those "lousy Jews . . . 95 percent of whom are Eastern Jews, the scum of the earth . . . whose only standard is the box office" [Breen to Quigley, May 1, 1932] (84).

As the Catholic church was turning against the movie industry, Hays, a shrewd politician, knew that the best thing to do was to keep the ever-so Catholic Breen at a close distance. In doing so, he hoped he would appease the Catholic church. Moreover, Hays and the studios considered the Catholic church an extremely serious threat, since, unlike its Protestant counterpart, which was split into a myriad of denominations, it appeared as this great unified institution whose crusades against the movies could seriously hurt Hollywood; Breen would thus be a useful link between the industry and the Catholics.

The Catholic hierarchy began their mobilization against the movies during the summer of 1933, and it could not have been better timed, given the studios' shaky financial – and thus vulnerable – condition. Breen, along with the same group of Catholic laymen and priests who were instrumental in the creation of the Production Code – Quigley, Lord, Father FitzGeorge Dinneen S.J., and Wilfrid Parsons, editor of the Jesuit periodical *America* – decided that the only way to clean up the movies, and thus save the Code, was to pressurize and force the industry into doing so. Their next step was to convince Bishop John J. Cantwell of Los Angeles to lead the way in the crusade against Hollywood: Cantwell was to persuade all the bishops at their annual meeting in November to take action against immoral movies, accused of corrupting America's children. In the meantime, they would use powerful lay Catholics to financially pressurize the industry. Cantwell immediately took action and contacted two of the most prominent Catholic laymen in Los Angeles: Joseph Scott, a lawyer with industry ties, and Attilo Henry Giannini, chairman of the Bank of America, which heavily financed the movie industry. Pressurized by Cantwell, Giannini agreed to stop financing the industry if it continued to alienate the Catholic church, producing immoral movies; Scott's role was instead to warn and intimidate the studio heads.

On August 1, Breen, who all along had been going behind Hays's back, arranged for Scott and Giannini to meet with Hays, all the studio executives, Wingate and the SRC staff. After reminding the executives what he had said back in March, when they reaffirmed the Code, and identifying those movies in or about to go into production that were 'dangerous to the Code' (Breen to Quigley, Aug. 4, 1933, in Walsh, 85) – among which a new Mae West picture – he gave the floor to their two

guests. Giannini warned the industry leaders that they could not afford a boycott from the Catholic community and that the Bank of America could not and would not fund movies that were 'prostituting the youth of America' (Breen to Quigley, Aug. 4, 1933, in Black, 159). He then introduced Scott, who, after reading a letter from Cantwell condemning the immoral content of movies, addressed the Jewish executives, praising their religion and drawing a comparison between the persecution of the Irish Catholics and the Jewish people in America. Changing his tactics, he then, according to Breen, 'lashed into the Jews furiously' (Breen to Quigley, Aug. 4, 1933, in Walsh, 85). He brought up a recent trial in which a group of Jewish people had been accused of being communist radicals, and admonished that the combination of those accusations and 'dirty motion pictures' 'were serving to build up an enormous case against the Jews in the eyes of American people' (Breen to Quigley, Aug. 4, 1933, in Black, 159). He moreover called them 'disloyal' Americans, who were involved in 'a conspiracy to debauch . . .the youth of the land' (Ibid.). After reminding the studio heads of the Nazi attacks against Jews in Germany, he threatened them, maintaining that there were anti-Semitic groups in America as well, ready to use any excuse to attack them. If they carried on making 'dirty' movies, he cautioned, they would open the way not only to censorship, but also to racial hatred. Finally, he was certain that if the Catholic church condemned the movies publicly, all Christian forces in the country would line up against the industry, thus making box office revenues the least of their worries. Once Scott's speech ended, it was met by almost everyone with cheers, screams of approval, and pledges of reform. Joe Schenck, president of United Artists, and independent producer Sam Goldwyn were the only two that disapproved of it: Schenck attacked

the bishops and the reformers as narrow-minded bigots and expressed the firm intention to continue to make the kind of movies that the public wanted to see<sup>31</sup>.

The August 1 meeting was the first step in the Catholic crusade against the movies, which was made official by the speech given by Reverend Amleto Giovanni Cicognani, the newly appointed papal delegate to the United States, on October 1 in New York, 'Catholic are called by God, the Pope, the bishops and the priests, to a united and vigorous campaign for the purification of the cinema, which has become a deadly menace to morals' (Quigley to McNicholas, Oct. 4, 1933, in Walsh, 87). Skeptical about the studio heads' promises to reform the industry, and determined to stop the production of immoral pictures, Breen and his allies planned to hit Hollywood at the box office. However, as the bishops' annual meeting drew close, they could not agree on a common plan to put forward: on one hand, Breen and Quigley opposed any blacklist vigorously, fearing that this type of list would ultimately have the opposite result; on the other, Lord and Dinneen strongly believed that the Catholic people needed a reviewing system that would identify for them the sinful movies to avoid. At the November conclave, they finally reached a solution, i.e. , to appoint a special Episcopal Committee on Motion Pictures – quoting Breen – 'to keep the Jews worried' (Breen to McNicholas, Oct. 27, 1933, in Walsh, 87). This committee, which later went on to form a Catholic Legion of Decency, was to spread nationwide a Catholic attack against the evil of the movies through pulpits and the Catholic press. Cincinnati's Archbishop John T. McNicholas was elected chairman of the committee, while

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<sup>31</sup> See Walsh, 85, 86.

Cantwell, Bishop Hugh Boyle of Pittsburgh and Bishop John Noll of Fort Wayne were to act as advisers.

In December, after officially replacing Wingate at the helm of the SRC, Breen took on his mission to clean up the movies. He immediately tried to impose himself on the producers, refusing on various occasions to approve the release of a movie unless and until the suggested cuts had been made. Unsurprisingly enough, Breen's attempts to strictly – and forcefully – enforce the Code were met with an increasing number of appeals to the Board of Directors: from the adoption of the Production Code in March 1930 to Breen's takeover at the SRC at the end of 1933, only six pictures had been referred to the board, whereas, during the following four months, the studios would appeal over eight of his decisions. Another of Breen's attempts was to instill a stronger dose of 'moral compensating values' into movies: as Black points out,

Every film, according to Breen, must now contain 'sufficient good' to compensate for any evil that might be depicted. Films that had crime or sin as a major part of the plot must contain 'compensating moral value' to justify the subject matter. To Breen this meant these films must have a virtuous character who spoke as a 'voice for moral behavior', a character who clearly told the criminal/sinner that he or she was wrong. The behavior of the characters, and the choices they had, must be clearly spelled out. 'These were either right or wrong. If they were wrong, they should be labeled as such. It should not be left up to the discretion of an immature mind to decide for himself or herself whether the characters had acted rightly or wrongly', Breen argued. Nor did he believe movies were proper vehicles for moral and

ethical debates. There should be no gray areas in moral decisions in movies. Each film must contain a stern, crystal-clear moral lesson that featured suffering, punishment, and regeneration (173, 174).

Despite the creation of a committee against motion pictures, the Catholic church, during the first half of 1934, still lacked a united front in its campaign against the movies; as a result, each bishop was free to run its own campaign. Two fronts in particular polarized the movement: the one led by McNicholas and Cantwell's Episcopal Committee, Breen, and Quigley advocated a strategy of pressuring Hays with threats of blacklists and boycotts to force the studios to accept Breen's interpretation of the Code. They were against national boycotts and hoped that the constant threats from the Catholic community would compel the studio to accept a rigid enforcement of the Code by the rabid Catholic Breen. They also required the studios to abolish the producers' jury system. The other front was led by Cardinal George Mundelein, Dinneen, Lord, Cardinal O'Connell of Boston, and Cardinal Dougherty of Philadelphia, who had no intention of cooperating with Hays. They thus published lengthy blacklists of immoral and indecent movies, organized boycotts of movies and local theaters, and spurred Catholics to send letters of protest to Hays, the studios, the actors and actresses starring in those movies<sup>32</sup>.

On April 11, the Episcopal Committee furthered the campaign against Hollywood, announcing the plan to form a Legion of Decency. In addition to supplementing oral pledges during mass, the bishops were asked to distribute the pledge cards of the Legion of Decency and have parishioners sign it after mass. Each pledge

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<sup>32</sup> See Black, 166,167.

came in two copies so that those who signed it could retain a copy as a reminder of their obligations. The pledge partly read,

I wish to join the Legion of Decency, which condemns vile and unwholesome motion moving pictures. I unite with all who protest against them as a grave menace to youth, to home life, to country and religion.

I condemn absolutely those salacious motion pictures which, with other degrading agencies, are corrupting public morals and promoting sex mania in our land.

[. . .] I hereby promise to remain away from all motion pictures except those which do not offend decency and Christian morality. [. . .] I make this protest in a spirit of self-respect, and with the conviction that the American public does not demand filthy pictures, but clean entertainment and educational features (Skinner, 37).

Although the bishops never clearly stated what penalty was associated with the breaking of one's pledge, the solemnity in which was taken led many people to believe that watching an immoral movie constituted a mortal sin.

On May 23, Cardinal Dougherty urged Philadelphia's 823,000 Catholics to boycott all the movie theaters in the diocese. This boycott, which initially had been orchestrated by Breen, catapulted the Catholic anti-movie campaign, and the Legion of Decency into the national news. On June 9, the *NYT* acknowledged the Legion of Decency for the first time, and for the rest of 1934 the press wrote about the campaign almost every day. On June 18, the front page of *Variety* reported that over 1,750,000 people had already signed the Legion pledge. And week after

week they brought news that the Legion was gaining more and more support from non-Catholics (the president of Harvard and Sara Delano Roosevelt were among the most famous)<sup>33</sup>. Still in May, Lord, supported by Cardinal Mundelein, launched a national protest movement against Hollywood in his *Queen's Work*, where he blacklisted immoral and indecent movies, urging his readers to boycott them.

At the end of May, Hays started the negotiations with the church, and on July 1, it was announced that the new Production Code Administration (PCA) would replace the old Studio Relations Committee. Reporting Hays's words, the press release read, 'Under the new authority, effective July 15<sup>th</sup>, Joseph I. Breen, Production Code Administrator and Chief Assistant to Hays, will be vested with orders to pass final judgement on the fitness of all pictures for public showing'. In the new system, no film could begin production until Breen and his staff had approved a final script. Once the film was completed, it had to be resubmitted to the PCA for final clearance, and if approved, a PCA seal would be issued to the studio. 'All companies have agreed not to distribute or exhibit any picture which has not been finally approved and affixed with a Seal of Approval by the Code Administration'; those companies that refused to cooperate with Breen and the PCA would be fined \$ 25,000. Moreover, 'the local jury trial of neutral producers, formerly held when a producer appealed the edicts of the Association's Code representative'<sup>34</sup> had been abolished; as a result, any future appeal would rest with the Board of Directors of the MPPDA in New York. Finally, any picture released before July 15, 1934 still in circulation that was judged by Breen to be offensive would be pulled back and re-censored. Those movies that did not

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<sup>33</sup> See Walsh, 102.

<sup>34</sup> Press Release, July 1, 1934, Record #2410.

comply with Breen's new policy of moral compensation would be withdrawn permanently (*She Done Him Wrong* did not reappear until the 1960s).

*Film Weekly*, dismissing Hays as a 'mere Hindenberg', crowned Joseph Breen 'the Hitler of Hollywood'<sup>35</sup>. According to LaSalle, under Breen's new moral policy, 'Women got the worst of it',

Under the [enforced] Code, it wasn't only crime that didn't pay. Sex outside of marriage didn't pay. Adultery didn't pay. Divorce didn't pay. Leaving your husband didn't pay. Getting pregnant outside of wedlock didn't pay. Even having a job often didn't pay. Nothing paid. The Production Code ensured a miserable fate – or at least a rueful, chastened one – for any woman who stepped out of line.

Accordingly, every female character in movies got her virginity back. If she lost it again, she was in big trouble. The price for non-conjugal relations was either death, permanent loneliness, or a profuse, protracted, and degrading apology. At the same, women became the humble protectors of marriage. If a husband strayed and wanted to return, a wife not only had to take him back, she had to smile as she did it' (190, 192).

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<sup>35</sup> See Leff and Simmons, 59.

## PART TWO

### 2. RED-HEADED WOMAN (1932)

#### 2.1.Red-Headed Woman vs. Code

*Red-Headed Woman* (1932) was adapted from Katherine Bush's novel of the same name, published in 1931 in a serial form on the Saturday Evening Post. MGM bought the story when it was still being published, so they did not know it would eventually turn out to be a melodrama. As his first task under his MGM contract, F. Scott Fitzgerald was commissioned to write the screenplay adaptation of Bush's novel. Thalberg, MGM head of production, wanted to prove to Hays and the SRC that 'MGM can make sex entertaining, not offensive' (Vieira, 165), but unfortunately Fitzgerald 'turn(ed) the silly book into a tone poem' (Loos, 34)<sup>36</sup>. Moreover, Samuel Marx, story editor at MGM, could not get Fitzgerald 'to grasp the idea that Thalberg wanted the audience to laugh *with* Lil Andrews, not *at* her' (Carey, 147)<sup>37</sup>. The screenplay was then handed to Anita Loos, writer of the hugely popular *Gentlemen prefer Blondes* (1925) and who had already worked as a screenwriter in Hollywood. Once the screenplay was completed, Lamar Trotti, Joy's right-hand man at the SRC judged it 'utterly impossible', conceding, however, that 'If they get into it a feeling of satire, and make the girl a gold digger than an out-and-out strumpet, it may be all right, but right now it is the worst ever'

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<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Bauchamp, 283.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Vieira, 165.

(Trotti to McKenzie, April 27, 1932)<sup>38</sup>. According to Loos, what the censors could not get over ‘was the fact that a naughty girl came out victorious at the end of the picture’ (Vieira, 179). The script was revised and Thalberg pitched the film to Trotti as ‘broad burlesque’, assuring him ‘that the audience will laugh at the situations as broad comedy’ (Trotti to Hays, April 30, 1932)<sup>39</sup>. He also had the montage at the beginning of the film add in order to clearly demonstrate that it was a comedy, appeasing thus the censors. ‘We believe the changes effected make all the difference in the world . . . May I take this opportunity to congratulate you’ (Trotti to Thalberg, May 16, 1932)<sup>40</sup>, Trotti wrote to Thalberg, when the film was finally approved by the MPPDA. On July 7, 1932, in a letter to Milliken, an MPPDA official, Joy explained the reasons that led him to pass *Red-Headed Woman*,

In the cold projection room it seemed to be entirely contrary to the Code and one which, even though it conformed to the Code, would get us into all sorts of trouble. However, when seeing it with an audience it took on an entirely different flavor. So farcical did it seem that I was convinced that it was not contrary to the Code and would not (if properly advertised) cause us any undue concern (Joy to Carl Milliken, July 7, 1932)<sup>41</sup>.

Despite being a huge box office, it attracted indignation and outrage from reform groups and the Catholic Church which regarded it as “heavy sex” – and not as “farce” (Joy to Hays, June 17, 1932)<sup>42</sup>, as Joy and the SRC had hoped.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 179.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Beauchamp, 286.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Jacobs, 82.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in Beauchamp, 286.

## 2.2. 'He is a man, isn't he?'

As soon as the song used over the opening credits plays – 'The Red-Headed Woman' sung entirely during the New York nightclub scene – which goes, 'The doctors say that her only sins are just too many vitamins' – we can infer the moral stance of the film towards Lil's sexuality.

The first time we are introduced to Lil is through a montage, which is also the very beginning of the film, where Lil says a series of punch lines. It is used to set the comedic tone of the film. Lil is portrayed as a strong, sexual woman from the very beginning of the film. We see her immediately in action: accompanied by Sally, she goes to her boss Bill Legendre's house on a mission to seduce him. Before going in, she warns her friend who is determined to wait for her outside, 'You'd better not. I might be a long time'. Once inside, she tries to act as coquettish as possible and eventually convinces him to make her stay and help him write some letters. While Bill, distracted by her legs, is trying to dictate to her, the camera cuts to Sally who, tired of waiting for her, is about to leave. The next scene opens with a medium close-up of Lil sobbing, lying on the sofa; the camera then cuts to Bill who is standing, his pocket square and hair visibly untidy. When he begins to worry about her, she replies, 'Can a girl cry a little when she is happy?'. He tries to warn her not to take what has just happened between them too seriously, but she candidly says, 'I've been crazy about you from a distance ever since I was a kid' and that is the only reason why she took a job as a secretary at his office. Not only does she tell him how much she wants him, she also feistily replies, 'Listen to me, I am on your mind just as much as you are on

mine', when he tries to persuade her to forget all about it. The only moment in which Lil comes across as a parody is when Bill's back is turned and her face creases into a grim frown before she decides to play some music. The scene ends with them dancing a tango and kissing passionately, after Bill says, 'You have the reddest hair I've ever seen'. Lil is not afraid to be upfront about her sexuality and in no way is she ashamed about it

After his wife comes home and finds them together, Bill throws Lil out, and tries to explain himself. While Irene is crying, the scene dissolves into a close-up of a laughing Lil. 'And there we were like an uncensored movie where in waltzes Mrs. William Legendre Jr. . . . and catches us in the old family parlor', Lil boasts in front of Sally – making a meta-cinematic joke. When Sally sarcastically asks her what her intentions are, she retorts, 'Listen Sally, I made up my mind a long time ago. I'm not gonna spend my whole life on the wrong side of the railroad tracks', clarifying, 'Say, it's just as easy to hook a rich man as it is to get hooked by a poor one'. She desperately wants to climb the social ladder, and is determined to use her sexuality to do so.

The following day, Lil is compelled to quit her job at Bill's office. She will have a chance to meet Bill again when one night they find themselves at the same nightclub. Even if he is with his wife, Lil sends for him pretending there is phone call for him, corners him in the telephone booth, grabs his face and fiercely kisses him. 'You can come to my place any time; nobody will never know about it', she explicitly says to Bill who is struggling to get out of a space which would be narrow for just one person. Eventually, she has him say that he will go to her place the

following night and lets him go. Once again, Lil literally throws herself at Bill and fiercely tries to seduce him.

As Bill has not showed up at her apartment the following night, Lil, drunk, decides to go to his house where she makes a scene in front of him and her wife. Once back at her place, she is followed by a furious Bill. She has him bring to her bedroom by Sally who could not be more shocked. As soon as he closes the door behind him, he gives her money in order to leave town. They start arguing,

Lil: Oh no, Bill. I love you so. If you knew how much I love you.

Bill: Love! Why don't you call it by its right name.

Lil: Let me stay. I'll do everything you tell me to do. I'll be just what you want me to be.

Bill: There's only one thing you could be. You have one filthy idea in your whole rotten makeup.

Lil: Oh, is that so? Well, if I have, don't try to fool yourself that you don't share it. [She forcibly kisses him].

Bill [angrily]: Get away from me! And don't forget what I've told you. [Lil jumps in front of him and locks the door. Then the camera cuts to Sally who is outside, against the door].

Sally [shockingly]: She's locked him in.

Bill [furiously]: Give me that key. GIVE ME THAT KEY.

Lil: You're afraid of yourself because you love me.

Bill: Am I?

Lil: You're afraid you'll take me in your arms. You're afraid you're gonna kiss me.

Bill: Is that so?

Lil: Why don't you do it?

Bill: Keep away, I'm warning you.

Lil: Why don't you do it?

Bill: Keep away from me!

Lil: You don't dare stay here. You don't trust yourself. [Bill slaps her].

Lil [smiling]: Do it again. I like it! Do it again!

Lil clings tightly to his neck and kisses him before he roughly pushes her aside. The camera cuts to Sally who is eavesdropping against the door and from the noises that come from inside the bedroom we realize that he is manhandling her. When the noises stop, the camera cuts to the door inside the bedroom and Bill, visibly upset, walks into the frame. Lil is sobbing, lying on the floor and when he sees that she cannot get up, he hesitatingly picks her up and lays her down on the bed. Finally, he is about leave, but the door is still locked; he begs for the key and Lil, looking him in the eyes, puts it down her dress in a close-up. Then the lights dims and the scene ends with Bill's back gradually blocking the screen while he goes up to her. In this scene, we see Lil's unappeasable sexuality in action: she grabs him, kisses him, seduces him, and does everything in her power to make him stay. Bill reacts with brute violence, but even when he slaps her she does not hold back. She is not afraid of him and in the end she prevails, because she wins him over. Once the screen is pitch black, we hear knocking and through an iris-in we see that we are in court, witnessing the Legendres' divorce.

We find out that Lil and Bill got married, when Irene pays him a visit, after hearing of his strange behavior at the country club. There she blames Lil's sexuality and

accuses Lil of being a monster without feelings – ‘love is one thing you don’t know anything about!’.

Lil soon discovers that her married life is not as easy as she thought it would. She is not invited to any parties or social events, and even Bill’s family snub her. When she hears that she is not invited to the banquet in honor of Mr. Gaerste, a coal magnate who is in business with Bill, as opposed to Irene, she feels humiliated. She starts arguing with Bill, because she wants to meet Mr. Gaerste even though he refuses to,

Lil: All right, then you’ll arrange for me to bump into him in your office just as if it were an accident.

Bill: That won’t get you anything either.

Lil: Is that so? And I suppose I’m just a cross-eyed, half-witted hunchback cripple.

Bill: You’d get over much better with Gaerste if you were.

Lil: What do you mean?

Bill: Darling, he’s a narrow-minded, straight-laced, old dodo.

Lil: Well, he is a man, isn’t he?

And we really grasp the irony of this last line which Lil also said at the very beginning of the film, when Sally warned her that Bill was very much in love with his wife. The scene ends in a dissolve where we see an upset old man staring out of a window, followed by a mid-shot of a woman’s legs while she is fixing her stockings. The camera then goes up and reveals that the woman is indeed Lil. ‘Now, Mr. Gaerste you mustn’t take this too seriously too seriously’, says Lil

ironically. This is a parody of Bill's line at the beginning of their affair, 'Now, Red, there is no use in taking this too seriously', except now the gender roles are reversed. She uses her sexuality once again to exploit a rich man: Lil first teases Gaerste, because he did not want to meet her, then blackmails him into inviting Renwood's most prominent people to a party in his honor at her house..

After the party, Lil could not be more pleased, even though her guests had to leave early because of a charity event the day after. She is convinced she has finally been accepted by the society of Renwood and looks forward to telling Sally, who is waiting upstairs, how well the party went. Sally, who clearly serves as a comedic foil for the plot, is also the voice of truth. She is the one who has to tell Lil that all her guests are going to Irene's across the street for a surprise party with the intention to humiliate her in the papers the day after. Heartbroken and humiliated, she runs across the street and, half-naked, yells at them that they are a group of hypocrites. Bill has to intervene and carry her into the house in order to make her stop. She is crying and when Bill calls her hysterical, she retorts, 'Hysterical because I won't send them thanks for insulting me, while you stand by and give them three cheers'. This is the most moving scene in the whole film. For the first time we are sympathetic towards Lil. Her vulnerability and desperate need for acceptance make us feel for her and be on her side.

Having found Lil's handkerchief in Gaerte's hotel room, Bill's father suggests that Bill let Lil go to New York, where Gaerste will be staying, in order to find out if his wife is cheating on him. No sooner does Lil arrive in New York, than she finds her way to Gaerste's penthouse. Gaerste tries to resist her without success. From

then on they will be lovers. One night they are dancing at a nightclub to the song, 'Red-Headed Woman', which now we can hear entirely,

I'll sing you a siren song of the red-headed woman/  
A serenade for . . .  
She is a red-headed woman/  
My lips are hot hot/  
But what they do is hot hot/  
My arms are open to you/  
Temptation lures/  
And my eyes meet yours/  
Paradise will open up its door.

(And then the chorus) The doctors say that her only sins/  
are just too many vitamins/  
I warn you all that/  
You are bound to fall/  
For the red-headed woman.

Clearly the song is about Lil. Neither the song nor the film take a moral stance against Lil's sexuality and refrain from passing judgment on her.

The day after proposing to Lil, Gaerste accompanies her to her suite, followed by his chauffeur who is carrying her packages. Once Gaerste has left, Lil and Gaerste's chauffeur, Albert, passionately kiss. 'I've got the most marvelous news for you: I'm going to marry Gaerste', she then ecstatically tells him, still in his arms; 'Oh, sweetheart!', he replies in his French accent as ecstatically as she. Thanks to their marriage, Lil and Albert will be able to continue their affair. Here, we find out that besides going around seducing rich men, Lil has also a lover with whom she seems in love.

Meanwhile, Gaerste finds out from Bill, who shows him compromising photographs of Lil and Albert together, that Lil and Albert's affair began the very same day he arrived in New York. Gaerste thus sends for Albert who is still

downstairs, 'working on Mrs. Legendre's radio'. After Albert has left, Lil reveals Sally the good news,

Lil: Sally, I'm the happiest girl in the world! I'm in love and I'm gonna be married.

Sally [startlingly]: Gonna married Albert?

Lil: No. Gaerste.

Sally [shockingly]: In love with [pause] Gaerste?

Lil: No, Albert [Sally gasps]. Besides, I always did wanna learn French.

Sally [sarcastically]: Why don't you get yourself a laundry man, and learn Chinese?

Sally, like in the New York nightclub scene when she jokes about Lil being 'strict', pokes fun at Lil's rampant sexuality.

While Albert tells her that Gaerste has dismissed him, Lil interrupts him and says, 'I'd rather you didn't work anyway'. Once again the gender roles are reversed. We can feel Lil's deep disappointment. She tries to smile as usual, but by the expressions on her face we realize that she is genuinely upset. When she finds out that Gaerste knows about their affair and that Albert has got only 1'500 dollars saved, she decides to go back to Renwood.

Once in Renwood, not finding Bill at home, Lil goes to his father's house and there she discovers that Bill and Irene have reconciled. When she tries to win him back, Mr. Legendre Sr. pulls his checkbook out and starts writing her a check. Bill and Irene sneak out in the meantime. As soon as she finds out that it is a check for

only 500 dollars, she becomes furious. This plot device seems rather contrived and it might be the only time in which the film passes judgment on Lil.

Hearing Bill's car leaving, Lil is about to chase him, but she runs back and snatches her check, before throwing herself in front of his car. She has him get out of the car and it seems that she wants to tell him something, but Bill, furious, insults and humiliates her. She pulls out a gun from her purse, and while he is driving away with Irene, she shoots at the car. The scene ends with the car crashing into a tree and a light pole, and Irene trying to revive Bill.

Through a montage in which we see newspaper headlines while hearing people gossiping, we discover that Bill has survived the car crash and has decided not to press charges against Lil.

Two years later, Bill, Irene and his father are in France, watching the Grand Prix de Paris, when Bill and his father, through their binoculars, recognize Lil who is now married to a French count. The film ends with a mid-shot of Lil and her very old and very rich husband in the back of their rolls Royce while he affectionately kisses her hand, and in a doll-out we then see the chauffeur,

Lil: Albert?

Chauffeur: Madam?

Lil: À la maison.

Chauffeur: Oui, madam!

In the overall film, Lil's sexuality is neither condemned nor demonized. Lil is not afraid, or ashamed to use her sexuality to exploit rich men. 'Say, it's just as easy to hook a rich man as it is to get hooked by a poor one', she candidly says to her

friend Sally. She is portrayed as a strong, sexual woman who dares say to men, 'I am on your mind just as much as you are on mine', and when judged to have 'one filthy idea in your whole rotten makeup', she retorts, 'Well, if I have, don't try to fool yourself that you don't share it'. She fearlessly affirms her sexuality, even when men try to put her down: 'Do it again. I like it! Do it again!', she exclaims after being slapped.

To have the film approved by the SRC, Lil's character was to be portrayed as farcical as possible. This is apparent only in few scenes; for instance, in the one where Irene has just stormed out, after accusing Lil of having 'caught him (Bill) with sex': Lil is lying on the sofa and starts addressing Bill in baby talk. From her facial expressions to her lines, 'Bill, come here', 'I'm crazy about you', make what is the end of the scene mostly a parody. Another example is when Legendre Sr. is writing her a check and she acts interested.

This intent is contradicted by the scenes in which Lil manages to show emotional depth: for instance when, after her party, hurt and mortified, she yells in front of Irene's house, and when Albert tells her that he has been dismissed by Gaerste. These are the scenes where we really feel sympathy for her.

Not only is the film interesting for its portrayal of female sexuality, but also for challenging, at times, gender roles. They are parodied in some scenes: in the one where Gaerste is very upset, because Lil did not tell him that she was Bill Legendre's wife, and Lil says, adjusting her nylons, 'Now, Mr. Gaerste you mustn't take this too seriously'; another is when she tells Albert 'I'd rather you didn't work anyway'.

The ending is probably the best part of *Red-Headed Woman*: in no way does the film have her reformed or punished; instead, her sexuality is celebrated until the very end. The movie refreshingly ends with Lil happily married with her rich, old husband in the backseat of a Rolls Royce, while she is being taken home by her personal chauffeur/lover, Albert.

### 3. I'M NO ANGEL (1933)

Women are more tickled at Mae West than men are, because it is the picture of a woman triumphant, ruthless and unscrupulously triumphant, over poor, blundering simple-minded men. . . . And perfectly respectable matrons [. . .] accept the vulgar, funny, and happy type represented by Mae West, are all of them delighted by her. Very few of these respectable matrons would pursue her tactics, but they like to see it done (Russell to Hays, Nov. 17, 1933)<sup>43</sup>.

#### 3.1.I'm No Angel Vs. Code

After *She Made Him Wrong* (1933) reportedly saved Paramount from bankruptcy thanks to its huge box office success, Mae West was right away commissioned to make another picture. This time, however, she was kept under strict scrutiny by the censors.

Just a month after its release, *She Made Him Wrong* was deemed a 'mistake'<sup>44</sup> by Hays himself because of the backlash mostly from reform groups, and 'most of the company heads' agreed with Sidney R. Kent, president of Fox Film Corp., who heavily criticized it, '[*She Made Him Wrong*] is worse than *Red Headed Woman* from the standpoint of the industry – it is far more suggestive in word and what is

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<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Black, 80.

<sup>44</sup> Hays to Kent, March 10, 1933, Record #895.

not said is suggested in action<sup>45</sup>. Addressing Kent's concerns, on March 10, 1933 Hays wrote to Wingate,

I cannot too strongly urge you to proceed in the strict enforcement of the Code. This renewed effort should apply to the scripts as they come in, to the pictures in production, and to those about to be finished and now to be seen by you<sup>46</sup>.

Having tightened restrictions and worried about pictures that could potentially bring 'public resentment', and thus 'disaster to the whole industry'<sup>47</sup>, the censors were particularly cautious with West's new project.

Because of her love for exotic animals, West had Paramount purchase a circus-themed screenplay by Lowell Brentano, from which, with the help of studio writers, West developed *I'm No Angel*. Just before production, Paramount sent the script to Wingate, who reviewed it, and wrote back, 'as to theme, the story seems to present no difficulties but of course, it will depend very largely on the way in which many of the scenes are treated' (Wingate to Boston, June 23, 1933)<sup>48</sup>, stressing that the censors would have to view the final product in order to give definitive approval. He was mostly concerned with West's distinctive double entendres and innuendos, featured in her songs: he objected to 'No One Does It Like That Dallas Man'; while Paramount claimed that all 'the Dallas man does is kiss, hug the ladies, and ride a horse' (Wingate to Boston, July 5, 1933)<sup>49</sup>, Wingate deemed offensive such lines as, 'He's a wild horse trainer, with a special whip; gals, you'll

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45 Kent to Hays, March 9, 1933, Record #893.

46 Hays to Wingate, March 10, 1933, Record #894.

47 Memo to MPPDA (members), May 19, 1933, Record #1932.

48 Quoted in Watts, 172.

49 Ibid., 173.

go insaner' (Holman to McKenzie, June 21, 1933)<sup>50</sup>, and 'he can ride' (AFI Catalog). Eventually, Paramount agreed to replace the words 'does it' with 'loves me' (McKenzie to Wingate and Breen, June 23, 1933)<sup>51</sup>, and to sanitize the lyrics. He also considered 'overly suggestive' lines like, 'Baby, I can warm you with this love of mine' (AFI Catalog), and 'Love me, honey, love me until I just don't care' (Leff, Simmons, 41), featured in the song 'I'm No Angel', as well as, 'It takes a good man to make me' (AFI Catalog) in the song 'Goin' to Town'. 'They Call Me Sister Honky Tonk' and Tira's dance was to be 'handled carefully' (Watts, 173); moreover, for this first scene, two versions of her dress were intentionally created, one so outrageously revealing, as to be certain that they would pass the other, a translucent dress whose key parts were covered in beadwork. The title of 'Take Me' was changed into 'I Want You, I Need You' (AFI Catalog), and West was prohibited to sing it as a blues song, but rather it was suggested that it should be re-arranged as a ballad.

On the set of *I'm No Angel*, West was reportedly much more involved than in *She Made Him Wrong*. According to Sidney Skolsky, a gossip columnist who worked as an extra in the film, West was meticulous and had thorough control on set. Under her instructions, filming proceeded systematically, and the script was revised repeatedly. Despite collaborating with an experienced director like Wesley Ruggles, West had many scenes reshot and supposedly redid one song eighteen times before being satisfied.

On September 16, *I'm No Angel* was previewed to the SRC. Wingate found the film 'much better than we expected' (Leff, Simmons, 42), and noted 'the care with

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Quoted in Leff, Simmons, 41.

which the picture had been treated from the standpoint both of the Code, and of censorship' (AFI Catalog). He even assured Hays that , 'though it contained the expected number of wise-cracks and Mae Westism, we believe it will meet with no real difficulties' (Ibid.) . He was very pleased that 'the songs have been tone down, and while many gags border on questionable dialogue, the fadeouts are so arranged, that most of the suggestions are left to the imagination [. . .]' (Ibid.).

Just two weeks after its release, Ray Norr, who handled special Public Relations work for the MPPDA, wrote Hays a memorandum, whose purpose was 'to meet the serious problem that threatens the industry as whole, unless a careful policy is followed in the production of further Mae West features'. Norr was especially concerned about 'investigation of church and social service criticism of the current Mae West pictures', and possibly becoming a problem 'analogous to the Arbuckle case'. He was particularly preoccupied with her second picture: unlike *She Done Him Wrong*, which was 'a picture done in the broadest comedy and against the background of the mauve decade', *I'm No Angel* depicted 'the triumphal progress [. . .] of a circus prostitute who takes on all comers'. Moreover, he anticipated that the criticism of her third picture, if it 'follows a similar line and type', 'will be unchallengeable'. Likely for him, it would be released after the 1934 enforcement of the Code, and thus heavily censored.

Norr concluded his memorandum, illustrating Mae West's 'evil influence',

Her great popularity will be cited as the crowning proof of the evil influence of the screen. The very man who will guffaw at Mae West's performances as a reminder of the ribald days of his past will resent her effect upon the young,

when his daughter imitates the Mae West wiggle before her boy friends, and mouths 'Come up and see me some time'.

And he goes as far as to indirectly call her pictures 'deliberate prostitution of the screen',

Granted that the industry has the entertainment right to produce Mae West's favorite characterizations on the screen, that the highly humorous touch which she gives to her roles places them in the category of broad comedy, the continued featuring of Mae West in the role of a predatory female who scorns sex morality, secures tolerance for her profession and gets 'em all – from pickpocket to judge – gives religious and social critics a perfect example of their charge of deliberate prostitution of the screen, the industry's denial of its public promises, and the pernicious influence on the young of such performance<sup>52</sup>.

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<sup>52</sup> Norr to Hays, October 18, 1933, Record #915 .

### 3.2. 'Not tonight, I gotta see my aunt'

[. . .] she can assume shapes that will astonish a chiropractor, and next to her, a wiggling worm looks paralyzed. [. . .] Boys, with the right kind of encouragement, she will throw discretion to the winds, and her hips to the north, east, south, and west.

[. . .] And now inside, Tira, the girl who makes your dreams come true.

When Tira hits the stage, she is not quite 'the supreme flower of feminine pulchritude', as the Barker described her, she is not overly thin, nor is she extremely young. On the catwalk, she struts around parodying a sensual walk, moving her shoulders, rather than swinging her hips, and retorts sarcastically whenever she is thrown compliments. On the stage, besides moaning, she suggestively sings, 'I'm a devil in disguise/ [. . .] Just play a passionate strain/ And I'll be low down again/ It's fire and it's flames/ So be careful of this dame [. . .]'.

In the film's diegesis, Tira represents a very sensual and desirable woman: she is charismatic, over-confident, and witty. It is refreshing that she is not what one may define as canonically beautiful, her stomach is not flat and that she seems like in her forties. She is a strong and smart woman, who teases men with her snappy remarks, double entendres and sarcastic moaning, and is not afraid to call them 'suckers'.

'You have a wonderful future: I see a man in your life', a future-teller thoughtfully says to her; 'What? Only one?', disconcertingly retorts Tira, looking in turn into his crystal ball. Throughout the film, she proudly asserts her sexuality. She goes against the idea that women should not express in any way that they can enjoy

sex. When a friend of hers remarks, 'Gee, Tira, you always has such swell things. How do you do it on your salary?', she knowingly replies, 'It's a gift, honey. It's a gift'. She then proceeds to show her the lid of her trunk, fully covered with photographs of men, gentlemen, business men, sailors, soldiers, carnival performers, and so on. Not only does she boast of having been with several men, but also dares treat men as sexual objects and in doing so, she challenges gender expectations and stereotypes. 'Don't worry, I ain't gonna hurt him. I only wanna feel his muscles', Tira assures an acrobat who is extremely concerned about his colleague's infatuation with her.

Also, in her relationship with her lover, Slick, a pickpocket who works in the same circus, she stands up for herself and defies gender stereotypes:

Slick: What are you playing me the chill for all of a sudden, baby?

Tira: Because I ain't exactly in the mood.

Slick: It seems like I can't put you in the mood, lately.

Tira: I guess you're right.

[. . .]

Slick: You seem awful anxious to get somewhere. . . Pulling something funny, if you ask me.

Tira: I ain't asking you.

[. . .]

Tira: What did you do? Got you a haircut or have your ears moved down?

Slick: It's a wonder you noticed.

He is the one who tries desperately to please her and who sits in front of the mirror, fixing his hair, while she suddenly notices that he has got a new haircut. She does not let him tell her what to do, nor control her. She is unapologetic and does as she pleases. And that means also going with other men.

While she successfully tours the biggest cities taming lions and putting her head in their mouths, Tira meets Kirk Lawrence, a very wealthy younger man. During their first meeting, he confesses to her, 'Had to find a way to see you alone. [. . .] What I mean is, let's get better acquainted. You know, we can have a lot of fun together. You'll like me, when you know me. I'm not half bad', to whom Tira wickedly replies, 'Oh, yeah? If you're half the man I think you are, you'll do'. In a montage of close-ups of all the presents he lavishes on her, we get to see a card that reads, 'To Tira who can tame more than lions, Kirk'. In the following scene, Tira is framing a tiny photograph of Lawrence, and subsequently puts it next to a little deer statue and pats it. In a dolly-out we then realize that there is more than one animal statue and next to every statue, there is a photograph of a man, showcased on an étagère; the camera eventually tilts down revealing that every shelf is a showcase of little animal statues with their respective frames, every frame picturing a different man. Lounging on a chaise longue, she sings,

[. . .] I found myself a new kind of man [one maid: Sing it, honey!]/

He's mine to have and hold [another maid: And how!]/

I'm in my glory when he is around [another maid: Yes, ma'am!]/

Found a new way to go to town/

[music goes on playing in the background] [. . .]

One maid: You do keep me busy keeping track of your gentleman friends.

Tira: I want to make it easy for you, Beulah: I'm thinking about putting in a filing system.

[. . .] Another maid: You Know Miss Tira, I've been under the impression that you is a one-man woman.

Tira: I am! One man at a time.

[. . .]

[Tira singing] Takes a good man to break me [one maid: Sure does!]/

No man can shake me [another maid: I knows it!]/

Until I let him go/ [. . .]

In these scenes, Tira unabashedly expresses her rampant sexuality. She is a sexually confident and experienced woman who knows how to attract and 'tame' men, and is not afraid to seem loose or to be judged. She is the one who seduces and sexually teases them, and when she is made advances to, she manages still to be the one in control. Not only does she take pride in winning men over, but she even goes as far as to display their pictures as trophies each of which, according to their flaws, is represented by a specific animal. She confidently sings and jokes with her maids about her sexuality and chats with them about what kind of men they like.

Tira meets Lawrence's cousin, Mr. Clayton, for the first time when he goes to her penthouse in order to convince her to end the affair between her and his cousin. As soon as he comes in, she looks him up and down and starts seducing him. It is interesting to note how much younger he is than Tira. When she takes her cigarette holder and he gets closer to her in order to light it up, she asks him, 'What color eyes have you got?'; he is rather taken aback and embarrassedly

answers, 'Well, I don't know!'. Towards the end of their meeting, after he tells her that he did not know what to expect, despite having seen pictures of hers in the newspapers, she retorts, 'Oh, yeah? Ever seen this one here? That's one of my favorites', and she gives him what we can assume is a suggestive photograph of her; 'It looks just like you', he tells her, while examining it, 'Oh, it should; I posed for it. You like it?', 'Yes!', 'You can have it'. After refusing her invitation to stay for tea, he eventually stands up, and while he shakes her hand, he tells her, 'You've been wonderful'; Tira holds him back, and retorts, 'You've been kind of wonderful yourself'. Here, in no way is female sexuality depicted as submissive or passive; on the contrary, it is represented in a most empowering way. Had their roles been reversed, this scene would have been quite trite, and not worth analyzing.

As the film proceeds, we find out that Clayton is the lucky one: after a night out, he and Tira come back to her penthouse. While they are in each other's arms,

Clayton: Let me take a good look at you. [He kisses her] Oh, you were wonderful tonight.

Tira: I'm always wonderful at night.

Clayton: Yes, but tonight you were especially good.

Tira: Well, when I'm good, I'm very good. But when I'm bad . . . I'm better.

Tira's lines are filled with double entendres. She is provocative and dares to imply she is good in bed, while Clayton plays the more innocent and less experienced part. Once changed, she goes up to the piano, where he is playing, and while they are hugging, they are interrupted by Beulah,

Beulah [bringing them their drinks]: Yes ma'am, yes ma'am!

Tira: How am I doing, Beulah?

Beulah [laughing]: You're doing fine! You're doing grand!

Tira [smiling]: I'll do better, when you're gone, you rascal, you!

Beulah [laughing out loud]: Yes ma'am! I knows you will, ma'am. [Beulah leaves]

Tira: Great gals, huh?

Tira and Beulah comfortably joke about sex in front of Clayton. We have previously seen that Tira and her maids have got a close relationship. Their familiarity with one another allows us to see women – of different races – bonding over sexuality in an early thirties' film. '[. . .] me and men do pretty well together. [. . .] I'm just crazy about dark men', Libby jovially confesses to Tira and the other maids, earlier in the film. They are strong, confident women who are not afraid of enjoying themselves, and of unashamedly talking about it.

Not surprisingly, the scene ends with Clayton declaring his love to Tira, and not the other way around,

Clayton [while Tira starts playing the piano]: Honey, I wonder if you realize how much you mean to me . . . I've never been so happy in my life.

Tira: You mean that?

Clayton: I guess love is a wonderful thing.

Tira: Yes, I've heard it highly praised.

Another cliché is here parodied, that of only women saying 'I love you', the expectation that women, rather than men, should express their feelings. Of the two (of them), Clayton is the more sentimental one. While she is singing, he then, once

again, expresses his love for her, '[. . .] you can never guess how much I love you', to which she sarcastically replies, 'I'll never guess. You gotta show me'.

Tira's unrestrained sexuality comes through, once again, a few scenes later. Having heard of Tira's engagement to Clayton and her resolution to leave the circus, Barton, Tira's manager, comes up with the plan to have Clayton find Slick in Tira's penthouse, while she is away. Tira is stuck in Jersey with Barton's chauffeur, a sturdy young man,

Tira: Come on! Can't you hurry up and get that things fixed? I gotta get back. I'm expecting Mr. Clayton at the apartment.

Chauffeur: Doing the best I can, ma'am.

Tira: Your best is no good, try doing your worst.

Chauffeur: Yes, ma'am.

This is maybe one of the most provocative scenes in the whole film. Not only is it provocative for the sexually charged double entendres about a man who has to hurry up, but also for Tira's pat on the chauffeur's backside. Tira is as bold and confident as it gets; she unashamedly touches men in what may be considered inappropriate ways, and proudly asserts her sexuality whenever she chooses.

As Clayton called their marriage off, after finding Slick in her house, Tira sues him for 'breach of promise' in the final part of the film. The trial is not ultimately about Clayton, but rather it is concerned with Tira's sexuality and putting it under scrutiny,

Clayton's lawyer: Now, Miss Tira, I understand you've had a rather colorful past.

Tira: Well, I gotta admit that I've been the love interest in more than one guy's life. I don't see what my past has gotta do with my present.

Clayton's lawyer: We shall show that to the satisfaction of the court, I believe. Nevertheless, the fact remains that you have been on friendly terms with several men.

Tira: All right, I'm the sweetheart of Sigma Chi, so what?

[. . .]

Clayton's lawyer: Do you know a man named Wiley, generally called Slick?

Tira: Yes, I know the mug . . . the gentleman.

Clayton's lawyer: An do you recall the man you see there?

Tira: Uh, if I'm not mistaken, you mean that Dallas man.

Clayton's lawyer: And you're also acquainted, aren't you, with Mr. Kirk Lawrence?

Tira: Yes, I had the pleasure.

Clayton's lawyer: And no doubt you recall those five gentlemen, seated in the front row, right inside the railing? Mr. Blake, Mr. Larson, Mr. Willard, Mr. Forster, Mr. Harris.

Tira: I do recall their faces, but they ain't the names they gave me.

Tira's sexuality is here clearly put on trial. She is sarcastically replies to Clayton's lawyer who has brought in court her numerous male acquaintances in order to win the case. She makes the audience laugh, and even dares to flirt with the judge. When he insists on her 'colorful past' and on the fact that she has been 'on friendly terms with several men', her dismissive retort is, 'All right, I'm the sweetheart of

Sigma Chi, so what?'<sup>53</sup>, which manages to even make Clayton laugh. She does not let Clayton's lawyer portray her in a derogatory way in front of the jury and the audience, and uses her sarcasm to defend herself.

Most upsettingly, her lawyer requests a ten minute recess,

Tira's lawyer: Tira, why did you admit that you knew all these men?

Tira: But I do know them! You don't want me to commit perjury, do you?

Tira's lawyer: Yes, but why didn't you tell me that there were so many men in your life?

Tira: Why shouldn't I know guys? I've been around; I travel from coast to coast: dame like me can't make trips like that without meeting some of the male population!

That she should feel in some ways embarrassed or ashamed, or the fact that her acquaintance with numerous men could be used against her, does not cross her mind at all. She is not afraid of admitting she has known several men in her life, nor does she allow herself to be judged for that. She will not stand to be judged or ridiculed for her sexuality to the point that, against her lawyer's suggestion to drop charges, she is determined to question the witnesses herself. And in doing so, she demonstrates the sexual double standard: when she cross-examines Mr. Brown, the Dallas man, she has him admit that he had five wives, and was married to one of them, when they had a 'social date'. Furthermore, after Mr. Lawrence accuses Tira of having played him 'for a good thing', she exposes him,

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<sup>53</sup> *The Sweetheart of Sigma Chi* is a song written in 1911 by two college students, whose refrain begins with, 'The girl of my dream is the sweetest girl/ Of all the girls I know'. See [history.sigmachi.org/sweetheart](http://history.sigmachi.org/sweetheart).

Tira: You was engaged to marry a girl just at the time you started running around with me, wasn't you?

Lawrence: Yes.

Tira: And you know that your fiancé came up to see me to ask me to break it off with you, don't you?

Lawrence: I heard so.

Tira: All right, I broke it off. So what are you crying about?

Tira has the whole audience burst out laughing. She demonstrates how the double standard works concerning female and male sexuality: men are not to be blamed if they cheat, not to be judged, but rather praised, if they 'run around with' more than one woman, whereas if a woman is 'in friendly terms with several men', 'has a colorful past', she is to be criticized and put in her place. Finally, she exposes Slick who claims to have wandered around her apartment in silk pajamas and to have been seen there, in addition to accusing her of always 'hook[ing] some guy with a lot of dough'; after the objection is made that she is harassing him, she heatedly retorts, 'Who's harassing who? Just asking for a square deal, that's all! I'm just asking good, honest, and intelligent people not to take the words of an ex-convict against a good, honest, and innocent woman!'. They want to portray and label her as the bad guy, when in reality she is the one whose wedding has been called off while putting on her wedding dress, and, apparently, for no reason.

After Clayton, regretting that he had contested the case, ends the trial settling for the amount asked, Tira is surrounded by reporters and photographers right away. When she is asked what she is going to do now that she has won the case, she

answers, 'Carry on the same as before', and to another reporter asking, 'In all this, do you feel that you've been doing the right thing?', 'Show me a woman that can do any better!'. She triumphantly asserts her sexuality through to the end. And she certainly intends to 'be around', 'meeting some of the male population', and to continue being 'the sweetheart of Sigma Chi'. As a matter of fact, in the final scene of the film, we watch Tira seeing the judge off at her penthouse door. Next, she receives a phone call from 'juror number 4', 'the one with the nice, kind face', to whom she suggestively says, 'And don't forget, come up and see me sometime'. The film ends in a romantic way with Tira and Clayton reuniting,

Clayton: Oh, I'm crazy about you!

Tira: I did my best to make you that way.

Clayton: Look darling, you need to rest, and so do I. Let me take you away somewhere. We'll . . .

Tira: Would you call that a rest? [She begins to daydream]

Clayton: What are you thinking about?

Tira: The same thing you are.

On the whole, *I'm No Angel* unabashedly celebrates Tira's sexuality. Throughout the film, her sexuality is represented as bold, overt, and unrestrained. While we watch her performing 'They Call Me Sister Honky Tonk' at the very beginning, one man in the crowd asks another, both chewing their gums, 'Is that elegant or is that elegant?', and his obvious reply is, 'Elegant'. Paradoxically, she is not quite elegant; her walk, while she struts around on the catwalk, is not quite sensual, but

is rather comical; she is not quite beautiful, nor young. What is interesting is that she is portrayed as the epitome of desirability. It is as if she is playing a practical joke on all her male audience around her, and in fact, just before leaving the stage, she catcalls them 'suckers'. In this scene, she is mocking her audience who came to see her to be titillated, and view her as a sexual object. Once she is off-stage, she in reverse treats men in the same way.

Other interesting scenes are those in which she interacts with her maids, the scene where she seduces Clayton, and the trial scene. The interaction between Tira and her black maids constitutes the only (substantial) female bonding in the film, and, even though her maids are represented in a racially stereotypical way, it is fascinating to watch them comfortably joke and talk about men, and about their sexuality. The seduction scene where Tira meets Clayton for the first time is worth analyzing for the two opposite ways Tira and Clayton are portrayed: Tira is represented as the dominant one, while Clayton as the submissive one; she literally holds him back, when he is about to leave. It is also worth noting how Clayton is not afraid of a strong, confident, and experienced woman like Tira at all, and how her 'colorful past' does not bother him in the slightest. Finally, the trial scene is worth mentioning for how authentically Tira defends her sexuality, exposing the sexual double standard concerning men and women. It is also worth mentioning for the similarity with what West herself experienced in real life: on March 28, 1927, West was prosecuted, and battled in court against the accusation that her play, *SEX*, was an indecent production; nevertheless, on April 19, she was sentenced to ten days in jail. *SEX* was written by West herself under the pseudonym Jane Mast, and was about the vicissitudes of Margy Lamont, 'a lady,

as one critic noted, «of the evening – and of, for that matter, the afternoon and the morning too» (Watts, 73)<sup>54</sup>.

In addition to its positive and empowering depiction of Tira's sexuality, the script is mostly interesting for Tira's lines, filled with language play, double entendres, sexual innuendos, and West's excellent timing makes the most of them.

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<sup>54</sup> See Watts, 73-74, 90-92.

## 4. FEMALE (1933)

### 4.1 Female vs. Code

In a memorandum to all members of the MPPDA dated May 19, 1933, a list was made of 'the type of pictures, either already produced, in production or proposed to be produced' much likely to bring 'such public resentment as is certain to bring disaster to the whole industry if the course is persisted'<sup>55</sup>. Like *I'm No Angel* (1933), *Female* (1933) was one of them. Before the production of the film begun, Wingate, sent a letter to Warner Brothers' executives, extremely concerned about the plot of *Female*,

[. . .] It is made very plain that she (Alison) has been in the habit of sustaining her freedom from marriage, and at the same time satisfying a too definitely indicated sex hunger, by frequently inviting any young man who may appeal to her to her home and there bringing about a seduction. After having satisfied her desires with these various males, she pays no further attention to them other than to reward them with bonuses. And in the event that they become importunate, she has them transferred [. . .] (Wingate to Warner Bros., 1933, in Vieira, no page specified, TCM.com)

Warner Bros. executives assured SRC that changes would be made to the plot, and in November 11, 1933, the film was released in the version we can still watch today.

Two years later, after the strict enforcement of the Code, in a letter to Hays dated February 20, 1935, Breen deemed *Female* against the Production Code, and

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<sup>55</sup> Memo to MPPDA (members), May 19, 1933, Record #1932.

therefore classified it as 'Class I – which means that release of the picture be halted now and that no additional contracts be taken on'<sup>56</sup>; five days later, the General Sales Manager of Warner Bros., A. W. Smith, informed Hays that 'We have today issued instructions to our Branches to immediately withdraw (*Female*) from further distribution'<sup>57</sup>.

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<sup>56</sup> Breen to Hays, February 20, 1935, Record #1134.

<sup>57</sup> A. W. Smith to Hays, February 25, 1935, Record #1134.

## 4.2 'That's All'

Just after the montage of the assembly line of a huge automobile company at the very beginning of the film, and just before we get to see Alison, a very young male 'maid', who is coming out from the conference room, warns another, who is going in, 'Hey, Gus, you better tie your hat on before you go in there. The president is blowing the roof off', 'Who's getting it now?'. Once inside, in a long shot we see a man standing at the head of the conference table, his back towards us, while briefing a group of men smoking cigars. Then the camera cuts to a closer viewpoint, shifted to the man's left, and we get to see that Alison is at the other head of the table, and we clearly realize that she is the president of the company. When she speaks, her voice is monotone and authoritative; she does not tolerate being contradicted, and ends the briefing with a, 'That's all', sipping her cup of coffee. Alison is surrounded by business men, her secretary is an elderly man, and she has young men bring her coffee and the correspondence. Defying the gender roles of the period, Alison is here represented as a powerful woman in literally a men's world, an automobile company, who tells men what to do, and has them acting as her secretaries and waiting on her. In no way is she depicted as emotional or seductive, but rather she is cold and decisive.

Visited by a childhood friend, Alison enquires after her and has to pretend to be interested in her three children, all the while continuing to take business calls. Their chat continues at her house, and when Harriet asks her about her love life, she retorts,

Alison: Romance? Me? I haven't got time.

Harriet: Aren't you ever going to fall in love?

Alison: It's a career in itself. It takes too much time and energy. To me a woman in love is a pathetic spectacle: she's either too miserable she wants to die, or she's so happy you want to die.

Harriet: Aren't you ever going to marry?

Alison: No, thanks! Not me. You know, a long time ago, I decided to travel the same open road as men travel. So I treat men the way they've always treated women.

Harriet: You haven't much respect for men.

Alison: Of course, I know for some women men are a household necessity. Myself? I'd rather have a canary.

Unlike Harriet who could not be happier to be married, Alison does not believe in either marriage or love; but most importantly she does not believe that a woman must marry in order to be happy, fulfilled. Not only does she not envy her friend, but she also thinks that it is unfortunate to see a woman in love. Ironically enough, when Alison claims she 'treat(s) men the way they've always treated women', Harriet infers that she then must not have much respect for men. Alison is an independent woman who stands up for herself, and who does not need a husband. She 'travel(s) the same road as men travel'; that is, she dares to be successful and committed to her work: 'It's like holding a tiger by the tail. Oh, but I love it: the battling and the excitement. I don't think I could do without it now', passionately she tells her friend. Harriet could not be more incredulous, and is concerned she is missing 'the real things', 'You mean men?', asks Alison, 'Oh, I see lots of men. But I've never found a real one'; a 'real man' according to Alison

would be one equal to her, who is as authoritative and decisive as her. Moreover, she is not afraid to admit she has sex with men and she does not care what people think of her: 'Things people say about me don't bother me', she assures her young chauffeur in the previous scene, realizing that he was involved in a fight at the stadium in order to defend her.

When Alison invites Cooper, one of her employees, to dinner, she does so in order to seduce him. 'Good. We're alone', she tells him, the music playing in the background, as soon as Harriet goes upstairs. He naively thinks she is encouraging him to talk about business, so he starts explaining to her his plan regarding boosting sales. Frustrated, she sinks into the sofa. As soon as he mentions that he used to play football in college, her face brightens up and she tries to distract him from talking about business, but still he does not get he is being seduced. 'Are you naturally enthusiastic?', Alison suggestively asks him, throwing a cushion on the carpet. The camera then cuts to Harriet who, upstairs, is on the telephone, telling her husband that Alison is at a business conference. Once again the camera cuts to Alison and Cooper, who are now on the carpet,

Cooper: Gee, I can't quite figure you out. At the office you're so strict and all business, kind of. [. . .] I can't get used seeing you this way.

Alison: What way?

Cooper: So . . . So human.

Alison: Oh, I'm really quite human. You'd be amazed!

Cooper: Gee, at the office you're certainly pretty tough. Everybody's scared of you.

Alison: Oh, but that's at the office. You're not scared of me now, are you?

Cooper: No, I should say not. Maybe I shouldn't bother you with my sales promotion plan tonight.

Alison then buzzes her butler to bring them vodka, which, as we will realize later in the film, is her ultimate move to seduce her men. She is the one who straightforwardly seduces men and who makes the first move. In her private life she is as authoritative and decisive as at work, so she purposely invites Cooper at her house in order to have sex with him. While Alison is the seductress, Cooper plays the part of the ingénue: he could not be more clueless about what is happening and even when she makes a comment about his physical appearance while talking about football, he does not take the hint. When they finally lie down on the carpet, he still cannot wrap his head around the fact that she is seducing him at her house, while at work she is his boss, and therefore she is very professional and businesslike. Alison is an experienced woman who dares to take men home and seduce them, but at the same time she is a very competent woman who runs a huge automobile company. And in doing so, she goes against gender stereotypes. The morning after, Harriet goes to say goodbye to Alison in her bedroom and finds her working from her bed, assisted by her male secretaries. When she makes a comment about that, Alison reassures her, 'They might as well be a couple of adding machines'. When she is working, she considers them strictly in a professional way.

At the office, Cooper is eager to see Alison: he looks tired, and we see in a close shot that on his desk, in a glass of water, there is the flower Alison gave him the night before. As soon as she comes in, he cheerfully stands up to say good morning to her, but he is immediately disappointed by her cold reply. Inside her

office, Alison starts dictating a letter to Briggs, one of her secretaries, who suddenly interrupts her,

Briggs: I can't go on this way!

Alison: What are you talking about?

Briggs: I can't stand it any longer! Being near you all day and having you ignore me.

Alison: I'm a busy woman. I can't be annoyed with jealous and moody men about me.

Briggs: But I love you.

Alison: That's enough of that. [Pettigrew comes into the office] Pettigrew, make arrangements to transfer Mr. Briggs here to our Montreal office.

Briggs tries to protest his transfer, but, resigned, he eventually leaves the office. Alison then receives a bouquet of flowers from Cooper with a card that reads, 'You are wonderful, Mr. George P. Cooper', 'Mr.' and 'P. Copper' crossed off. She calls him in her office, and the same scene with Briggs is here repeated,

Alison: Listen, Cooper. No more flowers. Don't get sentimental, understand?

Cooper: But, Alison . . .

Alison: Miss Drake.

Cooper: But last night . . .

Alison: Forget last night.

Cooper: But out at your home, I . . .

Alison: This is my office. I'm only interested in making automobiles here. That's what you are being paid for. Is that plain?

Cooper: Yes. I guess it is.

Another gender stereotype is here reversed: Briggs and Cooper are represented as sentimental men who get attached easily. They both have fallen in love with Alison, just after a night with her, and cannot stand being ignored by her at the office. They cannot manage to keep their private lives separate from their work. Cooper has kept the flower Alison gave him and put it on his desk, clearly a sign of his attachment to her. When he is called into her office, he, moreover, acts inappropriately, sitting casually on her desk, and calling her Alison. On the contrary, Alison is not only depicted as a woman who enjoys having casual sex with men, coldly dismissing them the day after, but also as a professional, authoritative one. As their boss, she refuses to treat them any differently than any other employee, and acts in a decisive and cold way. She does not tolerate being distracted from her work by 'jealous and moody men about (her)': if they cannot manage to act professionally, keeping their feelings for her to themselves, she has them transferred to another office right away.

Pettigrew, in the following scene, is sent by Alison to the Comptroller's office in order to give Cooper a bonus with his salary, and it is quite interesting what he has to say about his boss,

Pettigrew: Our bonus army is growing and growing.

Accountant: I'm afraid that young lady is riding for a fall.

Pettigrew: Oh, no, not Miss D. She's a superwoman.

Accountant: Super my eye.

Pettigrew: You don't appreciate her. She's the only honest woman I've ever met. There's nothing of the hypocrite about Miss D. That's more than you can say about the men she comes in contact with. Look at them: a pack of spineless yes men all after her for her money. She sees through them. That's why she tosses them aside. Just as Napoleon would have dismissed a ballet girl [ . . . ]

Despite having numerous lovers, Alison is not judged by Pettigrew at all. On the contrary, she is described by him as a 'super woman', and compared to Napoleon: she is quite heroic, considering she is the president of a huge automobile company, and has to deal with men all day long. Also, she is not afraid to have fun and use men as sex objects.

The man on whom Alison next sets her sights is a much younger car designer. The scene begins with a dolly-in of the servant's call box in her house where the sign 'swimming pool' appears. After she has beaten him in a swimming competition, and while they are relaxing on the poolside, her butler brings them some vodka,

Alison: [ . . . ] Don't you know a woman's always flattered when a men thinks about her. [ . . . ] And I am a woman.

Young man: As lovely as one of those marble statues in the night. [ . . . ] No, I mean so perfectly poised and cool.

Alison: Cool? That's strange. I was thinking that about you. You're a very cool young man. Have some vodka.

Young man: Oh, no, thanks. I'm intoxicated enough for the night [ . . . ] You're so ethereal, so spiritual.

Alison: You don't know much about women, do you?

His obvious answer is 'No'. The same music we heard when she seduced Cooper is here playing again in the background, and she has some vodka brought in order to happily conclude the evening, as in the scene with Cooper. Even though she tries her best to seduce him, he is clearly more interested in marble statues than women: he calls her 'goddess' multiple times, to which she eventually responds, 'Cold and pure, I know', and his emphasis is on her 'ethereal, spiritual' side. When she figures out he is an inexperienced man, she realizes she has wasted her time, and ends the evening, kindly offering him a study trip to Paris.

The second part of the film has Alison try to pretend to be a 'gentle and feminine' woman in order to seduce Thorne, a 'dominant male'. Pretending there is a company picnic, she has him come to the lakeside where she is waiting for him alone. She convinces him to stay, pretending to be unable to light a fire and to be scared of wild animals. After spending a pleasant afternoon, lying on under a tree,

Thorne: Do you realize that I know you as four entirely different people? The girl at the shooting gallery, she was amusing. Then the girl at the factory.

Alison: Tell me about her.

Thorne: Well, she's a very efficient, capable sort of thinking machine.

Alison [sarcastically]: Oh.

Thorne: And the girl at your house that night for dinner. Didn't like her.

Alison: Why not?

Thorne: Well, perhaps because I'm a man and I prefer to do my own hunting.

Alison [sarcastically]: Oh.

Thorne: And the girl you are here tonight.

Alison: Which one do you like best?

Thorne: This one.

Predictably enough, Thorne prefers the one who pretends to be vulnerable and submissive. They had such a fine time at the shooting gallery, when Alison went out in the city in order to avoid all the opportunist men at her party, and 'then when you found out who I was we didn't have a good time anymore'. That is when Thorne's masculinity begins to feel threatened by Alison's independence and success. After having sex, the morning after, he barges into her office, expecting to get married right away,

Alison: Well, marriage isn't for me . . . For us. After all, we can be so happy as we are. Don't let's spoil everything.

Thorne: Then you don't love me.

Alison: Oh, Jim, you're being unreasonable!

Thorne: I'm just one of the boys, is that it?

Alison: Don't be absurd [. . .]

Thorne: I suppose you think you're too superior for marriage, and love, and children. The things women were born for. Who do you think you are? Are you so drunk with your importance you think you can make your own rules? Well, you're a fake! You've been playing this part so long you've begun to believe it. [Scornfully] The great superwoman. Cracking your whip and

making these fool jump around. You and your new freedom. Why, if you weren't so pathetic, you'd be funny.

Alison does not want to get marry, because she is really committed to her work. On the other hand, Thorne cannot accept her for who she is. In order to feel like a 'man', he has to put her down. He scorns her, because she is a liberated, authoritative, and successful woman who happens to be the president of an automobile factory. He feels intimidated that she is superior to him, 'the great superwoman'. Finally, the film ends with Alison chasing him, driving her own car at high speed, and agreeing to marry him, giving him full power over the automobile company. She sarcastically utters her final lines, while the little pig just won at the fair starts squealing desperately in the backseats,

Thorne: What about you?

Alison: Oh, didn't you know? I'm going to have nine children.

Thorne: Is that all?

Alison: That's all.

Ironically enough, 'That's all' is also the phrase with which she ends every business meeting.

While the second part of the film, and in particular the ending, is arguably pro-Code, what is really interesting about *Female* is its first part and its representation of Alison's sexuality. Alison is depicted as a liberated, independent woman who successfully and authoritatively runs an automobile manufacturing company. It was rather ahead of its time, maybe even surrealistic, to present a woman as the

president of a company in an early 1930s' film, and in fact the setting, and in particular Alison's house has a futuristic, avant-garde style. She proudly tells a scandalized friend she would rather have a canary, than an husband. She, moreover, dares to 'travel the same open road as men travel' and ' treat men the way they've always treated women'; in other words, she dares to be successful and committed to her work, and treat men as sex objects. She enjoys inviting them to dinner, and then seducing them. But what it is particularly worth noting is that, even though she is a woman whose sexuality is rampant and unrestrained, her authority as the president of the company is never questioned, or doubted, or undermined; even after she leaves in tears in the middle of a meeting with the heads of the departments to decide the fate of the company towards the end of the film, her competence is not argued: she returns to the conference room, and resolutely decides to fight for the company, with the approval of all the other men in the room, 'Now you're talking!'. Although at the end Alison is arguably 'reformed' and agrees (verbally) to marry Thorne, while they are going to the bankers in New York, ultimately the film does not portray her as a monster, but rather demonstrates how a strong, sexual woman can run an automobile company capably and successfully.

## 5. DESIGN FOR LIVING (1933)

Heretofore, the picture industry has complacently sat back and allowed the screen to maintain that romance for screen women meant a love which led to singleness of coupling – heroines had to be in love to enjoy bedtime stories. Now we have a picture which upset that. The woman in our triangle contends that her sex is entitled to a liberty that only men have enjoyed in the past (Lubitsch, Paramount press release)<sup>58</sup>.

### 5.1 Design for Living vs. Code

During the summer of 1933, Hays found himself in a most critical position: he was being pressured by the heads of the various studios to approve films that were more and more racy, and his authority began to be challenged. Most concerned and exasperated by the problematic RKO production of *Ann Vickers*, he sent yet another letter to all studio heads, warning that films dealing with ‘illicit sex relationships’ were ‘never justified’ (Hays to Kathane, and all studio heads, July 31, 1933, in Black 103) in whatever manner they were treated. Besides *Ann Vickers*, *Design for Living* was another film deemed dangerous for the whole industry; Hays thus threatened to personally intervene if these films were to be in any way against the Code.

Disregarding completely the warning of the Hays Office concerning any adaptation of Coward’s play, *Design for Living*, which premiered in January 1933,

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<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Smedley, 160.

Paramount Studios, within six months, submitted to Wingate a first draft script loosely adapted from it. Wingate made it clear that even though the adaptation was 'treated on the whole in excellent taste', the film was 'to be judged pretty much by the way it appears on the screen, as is usually the case with a Lubitsch production' (Wingate to Hays, 26 June, 1933, in Smedley, 162), and we know that it was very unlikely that a film after production would be altered. He moreover suggested some changes to the dialogues, and in particular he wanted the characters to refer to love, rather than sex. After a preview in October 1933, Wingate reassured Hays that the film was about 'three people . . . find(ing) there is something more important in life than sex' (Wingate to Hays, 25 October, 1933, 162), and wrote to Botsford, an advertising manager at Paramount, 'whatever loose living is indicated, is not justified [i.e. by the film], but is shown as inimical to their happy relationship' (Wingate to A. M. Botsford, 13 November, 1933, 162).

In August 1935, Paramount submitted *Design for Living* to Breen for a reissue, but Breen denied it as it was deemed against the code. Furthermore, in 1940, Breen also denied a remake of *Design for Living* submitted by RKO Studios, 'because it is a story of gross sexual irregularity . . . [with] no "compensating moral values" of any kind' (Breen to Joseph Nolan, 29 August 1940, in Smedley, 162). And even in 1944, Breen prevented Paramount from reissuing the film, pointing out that it was one of those 'which flaired [sic] up early in 1934, and which resulted in the formation of the Legion of Decency' (Breen to Luigi Luraschi, 2 August, 1944, 163).

## 5.2 ‘Shall we be seated?’

We are introduced to Gilda in the very first scene of the film, when all three, Gilda, Tom, and, George, find themselves in the same cabin in a train to Paris. As she gets on the train, Gilda finds Tom and George sprawled on the same bench, snoring. She sits beside George’s legs, which are stretched out on the bench in front of him, and begins to draw both of them on her sketch book. Tom also stretches his legs out next to Gilda, on her other side. Once finished drawing, yawning, she does the same: she puts her feet up on the bench between them, and falls asleep. They are all three represented in the same way: asleep with their legs stretched out on the two benches.

After repeating precisely – and in a most delicate manner – the same warning to both Tom and George, ‘Immorality may be fun, but it isn’t fun enough to take the place of a hundred per cent virtue and three square meals a day’, Plunkett, Gilda’s ‘devoted friend for five years’; ‘her guide [. . .] and counselor’; ‘her protector’, and who ‘never got to first base’, pays Gilda a visit in her apartment,

Plunkett: Yesterday, it was Tom.

Gilda: Yes?

Plunkett: Today, it’s George.

Gilda: Yes?

Plunkett [resignedly]: Okay. [pause] Hoodlums. [pause] Artistic bums.

[indignantly] Both of them put together aren’t worth a dime.

[. . .]

Gilda: Max, have you ever been in love?

Plunkett: This is no time to answer that.

Gilda [gesticulating]: Have you ever felt your brain catch fire, and a curious, dreadful thing go right through your body down, down to your very toes, and leave you with your ears ringing?

Plunkett [in a most upset manner]: That's abnormal.

Gilda: Well, that's how I felt just before you came in [George had just left].

Plunkett [bothered]: Yes? How'd you feel yesterday after your promenade with Tom?

Gilda: Just the opposite. [gesticulating] It started in my toes, and came up, up, up very slowly till my brain caught fire. But the ringing in the ears was the same.

Gilda is casually seeing both Tom and George at the same time, and is not afraid to admit it to Plunkett. On the contrary, she vividly describes to him the very opposite, thrilling sensations each one of them gives her. She is in no way ashamed of her sexuality, but she rather asserts it candidly. Nor is she judged by Plunkett, who is more concerned with Tom and George being 'hoodlums', 'artistic bums', and a little annoyed about his failing attempts to pursue her.

Thanks to Plunkett's warning about the mutual necessity of food and virtue repeated to both of them, Tom and George find out that they are both having an affair with the same woman; impatiently, they are expecting Miss Farrow – as they decided to impersonally call her from then on – at their newly cleaned apartment, for an explanation. What follows is one of the funniest scenes in the whole film: hearing knockings on their door, they jump up from their seats to find out that at the door there is a boy who, from the stairwell, then confirms excitedly that they

are indeed Monsieur Curtis and Monsieur Chambers. While an allegro starts playing in the background, the camera cuts to the bottom of the stairs where Gilda is waiting with some children; as she climbs up to the fifth floor, the camera pans up gradually to reveal that she is chased by more and more children. Having arrived at her destination, she is now surrounded by a group of extremely curious children, who observe closely the interactions between the three of them,

Gilda: How do you do?

George: How do you do?

Gilda: How do you do?

Tom: How do you do?

One of the boys [whispering to another]: How do you do?

We can feel the sexual tension between the three of them: Gilda is excited to see them, and Tom and George are excited to see her. Closed the door behind them, Tom and George compete to show Gilda whose works, George's paintings or Tom's plays, are the best. Sprawling on Tom and George's dusty sofa,

Gilda: Couldn't we all be a little more nonchalant? [. . .] George?

George: Yes, please?

Gilda: Sit down here [George makes an excusing face to Tom and sits beside her].

Tom [disappointed]: Shall I leave the room?

Gilda: No, please! [Looking George in the eyes] George, dear George. When I let you make love to me yesterday, I didn't tell you something; I didn't tell you that the day before, Tom and I had . . . Did he tell you?

George: No.

Gilda: [. . .] George, promise me you won't start smashing furniture. I'm more than fond of Tommy.

[. . .]

Gilda [while Tom is making a triumphant face]: But . . . [Gilda stands up, facing Tom] Tom, when we were in the park – do you remember?

Tom: Very well!

Gilda: I didn't tell you . . . That morning I made a date with George for the next evening in my house, and I didn't call it off. And I want to be truthful. I . . .

.

Tom: Oh , I see. In other words, you're very fond of George.

Gilda: More than fond.

It is really interesting to see how, in this scene, Gilda declares her 'fondness' for both Tom and George. It is also interesting that she does not say that she loves them, but rather that she is 'fond', 'more than fond' of them. She candidly confesses that she desires them both, but most importantly she does not express any feelings of guilt, or shame about it, neither is she accused of being some sort of immoral, despicable woman. Subsequently, she points out,

A thing happened to me that usually happens to men. You see, a man can meet two, three, or even four women, and fall in love with all of them and then, by a process of, uh, interesting elimination, he is able to decide which one he prefers. But a woman must decide purely on instinct, guesswork, if

she wants to be considered nice. Oh, it's quite all right for her to try on a hundred hats, before she picks one out, but . . .

Tom: Very fine. But which chapeau do you want, madam?

Gilda: Both.

She points out the sexual double standard concerning men and women: while a man can 'try', sleep with different women, and eventually choose the one 'he prefers', a woman, in order to be deemed 'nice', has to grope, guess her way. And then, she says the unthinkable; that is, she desires them both; she dares to admit she wants both Tom and George. She ironically describes what she finds attractive about the two of them, comparing them to two different hats,

You see, George, you're sort of like a ragged straw hat with a very soft lining; a little out of shape; very dashy to look at, and very comfortable to wear. And you, Tom, chic, piquant, perched over one eye, and has to be watched on windy days. [sighing] And both so becoming. [. . .]

George [to Tom]: Poor girl. She's in rather a tough spot [Tom nods earnestly].

Gilda: George! Dear George, there's no use pretending you could make me forget Tom. I'd miss him. [. . .] And Tom, if I went with you up hill and down dale, he would haunt me like a bogeyman. [Tom and George starts arguing] [. . .] Shhh! There you have it! You hate him, he hates you, and you both end up by hating me. Boys, let's sit down. Now let's talk it over from every angle, without any excitement, like a disarmament conference.

Tom and George are the opposite of each other: Tom is very refined and gentlemanlike, whereas George is rough and tends to smash furniture, and that is

what Gilda finds attractive about them. She desires them for their opposite personalities, and refuses to choose one over the other, so they all three get down to work to find a solution,

Gilda: Well, boys, it's the only thing we can do. Let's forget sex.

George: Okay.

Tom: Agreed.

George: It may be a bit difficult in the beginning.

Tom: But it can be worked out.

Gilda: Oh, it'll be grand!

George: Save lots of time.

Tom: And confusion.

Gilda: We're going to concentrate on work. Your work, my work doesn't count. I think both you boys have a great deal of talent, but too much ego. You spend one day working, and a whole month bragging. Gentlemen, there are going to be some changes: I'm going to jump up and down on your ego; I'm going to criticize your work with a baseball bat; I'm going to tell you every day how bad your stuff is until you get something good, and if it's good, I'm going to tell you it's rotten till you get something better. I'm going to be a mother of the arts. [she gives each of them a kiss on the forehead] No sex [Tom and George shake their heads]. It's a gentleman's agreement.

They decide to set sex aside and have a platonic relationship instead, saving time and confusion. She decides to restrain her sexuality, and work instead as their agent: she is going to make them as successful as possible, criticizing them

in a brutal way in order to bring out the best in them, and ultimately help them sell their works. She immediately moves to their apartment, and for a while they manage to stick to their 'gentleman's agreement', but '(un)fortunately (she is) no gentleman'. After Tom has left for London, where, secretly and primarily thanks to Gilda, his play will be performed, Gilda and George find themselves alone in their apartment,

George: Gilda . . . I'm a pretty gloomy guy tonight. I have an idea I'm going to be rather bad company tonight: why don't you . . . Why don't you go out to a movie, or something? Tarzan is playing at the Adelphia Theater. Go on, like a good girl.

Gilda: Everything seems different, doesn't it?

George: You'd better go, Gilda, to Tarzan.

Gilda: I fancy this – uh – what you might call . . . tension, would keep up for some weeks. Would it be wiser if I moved to a hotel?

George: Yes, ma'am.

[Following scene, a continuation of the previous one] George: I love you, Gilda. Why lie about it? You can't change love by shaking hands with somebody. We're unreal, the three of us, trying to play jokes on nature. This is real [they kiss]. A million times more honest than all the art in the world.

Gilda [most conflicted]: I love you.

The scene ends with Gilda sprawling on the sofa, sighing, 'It's true we have a gentleman's agreement, but unfortunately I am no gentleman'. At beginning of the second scene, they are wandering around the apartment, when suddenly they

grab each other in a passionate way: not managing to repress her sexuality any more, she decides to stay and, therefore, break their agreement. Ironically enough, when George tries to convince her to go out, he suggests that she goes and sees the movie Tarzan, and says, 'You'd better go, Gilda, to Tarzan', when in fact he himself represents the rough, 'barbaric' type of man: he grabs and kisses her fiercely, besides smashing furniture; and that is why Gilda is attracted to him, and decides not to go and move to a hotel.

After the première of his play at the London Theatre, three months later, Tom returns to Paris in order to reunite with Gilda and George, who has also found success thanks to Gilda. Hoping to see them both and celebrate together, he finds just Gilda in their new penthouse. We understand that they are going to sleep together, the moment Gilda makes Tom's old, and now rusty typewriter ring. The day after, they have breakfast together,

Tom: No orange juice?

Gilda: We never have any.

Tom: Darling will you remember, after this, orange juice every morning?

Large glass.

Gilda: Every morning . . .

Tom: Except Sunday. Uh, Baked apple.

Gilda: It's going to make a big revolution in my menu.

Tom: The eggs are just right.

Gilda: You can have mine too.

Tom: No eggs for Gilda?

Gilda: No.

Tom: Conscience bothering you?

Gilda: No.

Tom: Confused?

Gilda: Very much so. [. . .]

Tom: Is George still given to smashing things?

Gilda: Well, we have to tell him the truth, regardless of what happens to the furniture.

Tom: I wonder if he'll hit me. He was never very civilized.

Gilda: You're right. He is kind of . . . kind of . . . barbaric. [. . .]

Gilda: No, no, I can't run away. I don't know how I'm going to tell him. I don't dare think. I don't even know what I'm going to tell him.

Tom: Very simple: you love me.

Gilda: That's the only thing I'm sure of, right now.

Tom is clearly the opposite of George: he likes to be complimented on his suit, he kisses her gently, and he drinks orange juice every morning, except for Sunday on which he has some other healthy food. Gilda is attracted to him, because, unlike George, he is a gentle, and very 'civilized' type of man. Ironically enough, Tom wonders if her conscience is bothering her, and 'No' is her immediate response; 'We did the same thing', she moreover pointed out to him, when they were discussing the affair between her and George: the film puts her on the same level as Tom and George; her sexuality is not treated any differently. She is not ashamed or guilty for having slept with him: she is just confused, because she loves, and desires both of them.

Having come back earlier from Nice, George could not be more surprised and happier to find Tom in his penthouse. Soon enough, he realizes that Gilda and Tom have slept together, and punches Tom in the face, after smashing a window. Gilda stops him, and before going in the other room to pack, and leave with Tom, she lets him know, 'I am sorry I hurt you. But it was inevitable'. It was inevitable, because she was attracted to him, and so she slept with him, as George did with her, when Tom was in London. When Tom returns to the living room, he lets George read a note that Gilda has left: as she loves them both, and does not want to have to choose one over the them, she has run away. The note ends, 'Be nice, and let me be nice: maybe I'll like it. Gilda'. Being nice means for a woman conforming to society's conventions, so she decides to marry Plunkett in New York. On their first night as a married couple, she goes through all the flowers that they have received, among which there is a vase with two tulips, a present from Tom and George, all the way from China,

Gilda [annoyed]: What did they do that for?

Plunkett: Why, they want to remember us. I think it's very nice of them.

Gilda: This is no time for remembering. It would have been much more tactful of them to forget. I think it's offensive.

Plunkett: Oh, well, now, that's a closed chapter in your life. Anyhow, you've nothing to worry about on that score. I've forgiven you.

Gilda: Forgiven me? For what?

Plunkett: Oh, that's all right.

Gilda: Well, I don't wanna be forgiven!

Plunkett: Well, I forgive you just the same. It'll make you feel better.

Plunkett condescendingly wants to forgive her for having slept with other men before marrying him. Gilda's reaction could not be more incredulous: she does not want to be forgiven, because she has done nothing to be forgiven for. Her sexuality is not something that she feels in any way guilty, or ashamed about. They have a similar conversation when Plunkett finds Gilda, Tom, and George in their bedroom at the party in honor of Egelbauer: he tries to reassure her, 'Now, I'm willing to drop the whole matter. I forgive you', at which Gilda, exasperated, fires back, 'Are you starting to forgive me again?'

The film ends with Gilda leaving Plunkett, who is on the phone with Egelbauer, and getting into a taxi with Tom and George: she is sat between them and they are headed back to Paris 'to the same old dump'; Gilda and Tom first kisses each other, then it is Gilda and George's turn,

Gilda: But, boys, this is very important. There's one thing that has to be understood.

George: I know.

Tom: Yes, we know. It's a gentleman's agreement [Tom and George shake hands, with Gilda's hand on top of them].

It is incredibly interesting how Gilda's sexuality is here represented. In no way is it judged, or punished, but it is rather celebrated, particularly at the end of the film. Gilda is compared to, and put on the same level as Tom and George from the very beginning, when all three are on the train in the same position, with their legs stretched out on the opposite bench. Even her sexuality is not treated any

differently: she asserts it in an assertive and candid way. She is not afraid, nor ashamed to show that she desires them, that she wants to sleep with them. 'A thing happened to me that usually happens to men', she explains to Tom and George, after they found out she was sleeping with both of them: she does not want to be considered 'nice', or be patronized and called 'a good girl', or be forgiven for being assertive; she wants to enjoy herself and to be able to try on different hats. And ironically enough, she happens to like two completely different hats, a straw cowboy hat, and a Basque beret. What it is also interesting is that Gilda is not rewarded, when she momentarily tries to be 'nice': on the contrary, she ends up 'being a trademark married to a slogan'; fed up with underwear, cement, and linoleum, she tells Plunkett, 'Now, listen, Plunkett Incorporated: you go down to those customers of yours, and give them a sales talk. Sell anything you want, but not me'. She stands up for herself, and leaves with Tom and George. The end is arguably the best part of the film: sat between the two of them, en route to Paris, she first kisses Tom, then she kisses George; it is okay for a woman to desire two different hats at the same time. Tom and George shake hands, and Gilda seals the pact, putting her hand on top of theirs: it's a woman's agreement.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In the first part of this thesis I have attempted to examine, using original documentation from the *MPPDA Digital Archive*, film censorship prior to the adoption of the Production Code, self-regulation/censorship and how the Production Code machinery worked – or did not work – during the so-called pre-Code era, and the circumstances that ultimately spurred Hollywood to strictly enforce the Code and to put in place a stricter censorship machinery.

With the creation of state censorship boards in more and more states – all imposing different standards of morality on films – and growing demands for federal censorship from reform groups, state legislators, and even congressmen, the motion picture industry finally decided at the end of the 1920s, when the talkies started overtaking silent movies, to adopt a form of self-regulation/censorship regarding the content of movies. The Production Code, ‘an amalgam of Irish-Catholic Victorianism’ (Doherty, 6), put in writing by Lord, was based on the idea that motion pictures, being ‘the art of the multitude’, had a moral importance and special moral obligations. According to the Code, movies should never lower the moral standards of the audience, and evil, crime, wrong-doing and sin should never be presented in attractive or sympathetic ways. In movies, there should be no moral doubt about the distinction between evil and good. It also pointed out what was acceptable and unacceptable in the representation of various sensitive subjects, among which sex, crime, and religion. In the subsequent four years, Hays, in trying to enforce the Code, had to appoint over three censors at the helm of the Studio Relations Committee – Jason Joy, James Wingate, and Joseph

Breen – who all struggled to approve movies that complied with the Code. The studios did not take the Production Code seriously: they interpreted it loosely, and considered it a general guideline. As Hays and the SRC were financed by the studios themselves, they thought that no serious action would be taken if they produced films that did not conform completely to the Code. They were moreover sure that if they had to appeal to the jury of ‘neutral’ producers, they would be backed by it. At the end of 1932, and in 1933, the studios were in a shaky financial condition – some were even on the verge of bankruptcy – because of the Depression, and the huge amount of money invested in sound technology and the building of movie house chains; as a result, in order to bring people to the movies, they ‘had no qualms about tossing aside the code and hanging on to their audiences by offering more sex stories, risqué language and glimpses of nudity than they had ever dared before’ (Sklar, 174). And it was just during this period, between the spring and summer of 1933, that the Catholics began to publicly condemn the movies. In November of the same year, with Breen’s support, it formed the Episcopal Committee on Motion Pictures with the purpose of launching a national Catholic crusade against the evil of the movies, while in April, 1934, it formed the Legion of Decency. In the spring of 1934, Catholic blacklists and boycotts started, ultimately forcing the industry to strictly enforce the Code and create the Production Code Administration in June, with Breen at the helm.

In the second part of this thesis, taking into account four films, I have attempted to analyze how female sexuality was portrayed on screen within the context of the Production Code machinery before its strict enforcement in mid-1934.

In *Red-Headed Woman* (1932), Lil is a gold digger who is not afraid to assert her sexuality and use it to exploit men and climb the social ladder. Throughout the film, her sexuality is neither condemned nor demonized. The film does not portray her as villain, even if, towards the end, she shoots at the car in which Bill and his wife are leaving. Instead, her sexuality is celebrated until the very end, when we see her in France, leaving in a Rolls Royce with her very rich and very old husband and the chauffeur, who is also her lover.

In *I'm No Angel* (1933), Tira, interpreted by Mae West who was in her forties when she filmed it, is a circus performer and an experienced woman who collects men and is proud of it. She treats men as sexual objects, but then she falls in love with Clayton, a much younger lawyer, and when he calls their marriage off for a misunderstanding, she takes him to court where her sexuality is ultimately put on trial. She brilliantly defends it, exposing the sexual double standard between men and women, and in the end, she and Clayton get back together. The film is filled with sexual innuendos.

In *Female* (1933), Alison, interpreted by Ruth Chatterton who was also in her forties when she filmed it, is the president of an automobile company who has male secretaries and assistants. She enjoys inviting her employees to dinner and seducing them. If they start having romantic feelings for her, she has them transferred to an office in Montreal. Conforming to the Code and contradicting the rest of the movie, the last part of the movie sees her fall in love with a car engineer whom in the end she decides to marry and give full control over the company. Despite this last part and the ending, Alison is portrayed as a strong woman with

sexual desires whose authority as the president of an automobile company is never called into question.

Finally, in *Design for Living* (1933), produced and directed by Ernst Lubitsch, and based on Coward's play of the same name, Gilda, an artist working for an advertising agency in Paris, meets on a train Tom and George, two artists who are friends with each others, and as she desires both of them, she starts seeing them at the same time. When they find out that they are seeing the same woman, all three decide to live together and to stick to the agreement not to have sex. After various vicissitudes – Gilda first sleeps with George, then with Tom, and after leaving them, she moves back to the United States with her boss and marries him – the film ends with Gilda first kissing Tom on the lips, then George, in a taxi, en route to Paris. Gilda's sexuality is not treated any differently than Tom's and George's and in the end the film has Gilda in a relationship with two men.

Despite the negotiations and the compromises with the SRC to make these movies conform to the Production Code, and thus the censors' attempts to regulate female sexuality, the heroines in these movies willfully and unabashedly assert their sexuality without being portrayed as unsympathetic, immoral, or even evil. They stand up for themselves, and often challenge the double standards of the period. Throughout these films (an exception is the last part of *Female*) their sexuality is celebrated, and not demonized, or punished. As Haskell points out, '[. . .] there was something tremendously exciting in the moral latitude offered movie heroines of the early thirties' (94). After the creation of the Production Code Administration, presided by Breen, the films '[. . .]that took a woman's point of view, that remained on the woman's side from start to finish, requiring of her no

last-minute conversion, apology, or reversion to happy subservient, all but disappeared. One can infer the intent of censorship by seeing what exactly got censored' (LaSalle, 166).

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